Models of Language Proficiency

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Abstract: This paper discusses the various models of language proficiency of second language, in this case English. It goes on to evaluate the various models of language proficiency and attempts to make a comparative and critical analysis of all the models and summarises the key components of defining language proficiency.

Keywords: language proficiency, language competence, communicative competence, communicative performance

I will first try to define Language Proficiency and then go on to discuss the various models of Language Proficiency for a second language in this case English.Work done by Chomsky has been influential in the discussion of models of language proficiency put forward by scholars in the field, notably by Hymes, Canale and Swain, Bachman and Palmer, McNamara and others.I will begin with Chomsky (1965) and conclude with the model developed by Bachman and Palmer in 1996 with additions suggested by McNamara (1996).

According to Chomsky (1965) 'language is innate', or in other words, human beings are pre-wired to learn language and are born with the basic rules for language intact.He believed that language rules are influenced by experience, learning and the environment. In his model of language competence, he proposed the concept of grammatical or linguistic competence and highlighted cognitive aspects of human language acquisition and learning. He distinguished between competence (one's underlying knowledge of the language) and performance (the realization of language in specific situations).

The other influential contribution to language performance in applied linguistics is Hymes's theory of communicative competence (Hymes, 1967, 1972). His theory of communicative competence can be represented in tabular form as shown in Figure 2.1.

Model of Knowledge	Model of Performance	Actual use
Competence	Performance	
Grammatical Competence	Pragmatic Competence	Actual Performance

Fig. 2.1 Hymes's approach to performance (Mc Namara, 1996, p. 54)

Hymes makes a distinction between actual instances of language use in real time (for example, in actual test performance) and abstract models of the underlying knowledge and capacities involved in language use. The distinction between actual use and underlying knowledge is a development of Chomsky's (1965,) competence/ performance distinction.

Hymes (1972) added that there was some ambiguity in Chomsky's use of the term performance and distinguishes two uses of the term:

- "(underlying) competence v. (actual) performance;

- (underlying) grammatical competence v. (underlying) models/rules of performance". (p.280)

Hymes also makes a distinction between what he calls "ability for use" as potential to perform – and "actual use" as the realization of this potential. For Hymes, ability for use refers to "the individual's potential to realize a possible, feasible and appropriate speech act, not to the realization itself" (Hornberger, 1989, p.226). Hymes (1989) confirms that this is what he intended; ability for use is something "underlying", a "state". (p.247) The term performance is therefore reserved by Hymes for "actual use and actual events" (1972, p.283).

There is a partial overlap between Hymes's distinctions and those proposed by Chomsky, although on the basic distinction between competence and performance, Chomsky (1980) makes a distinction between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence:

"I assume that it is possible in principle to have full grammatical competence and no pragmatic competence, hence no ability to use a language appropriately, though its syntax and semantics are intact". (p.59). Figure 2.2 presents a tabular summary of distinctions made by Chomsky which are related to those made by Hymes.

Model of Knowledge	Model of Performance	Actual use
Competence	Performance	
Grammatical Competence	Pragmatic Competence	Actual Performance

Fig 2.2 Chomsky's approach to performance (McNamara, 1996, p. 56)

Chomsky's focus was primarily in knowledge of language, not the capacities underlying performance. But for Hymes, *communicative competence* encompasses *both,* that isaspects of *knowledge* and aspects of *performance.*

Therefore, for Hymes the term 'communicative competence', emphasized social, interactive, and negotiating process of language. Hymes expanded Chomsky's notion of competence into communicative competence by including both grammatical rules and rules of language use.

Morrow (1979) on the other hand emphasized the notion of behavior in a communicative context, i.e., the candidate's ability to use the language to translate the competence (or lack of it) into actual performance in ordinary situations.

The distinctions proposed by Hymes are also reflected in the discussions of other writers, although they use different terms for the same concepts. Essentially, these writers are reinforcing and restating Hymes's distinctions using different terminology.

Davies (1989) talks of the need to differentiate between two aspects of communicative competence, as Hymes does: knowledge *that* (Hymes's *knowledge*) from knowledge *how* (Hymes's ability for use).For Davies the term *knowledge* refers to competence, and the terms *proficiency* or *control refers* to ability for use. Taylor (1988) proposes relabeling the terminology used by Hymes, substituting the terms *competence* for *knowledge*, and *proficiency* for *ability for use*, but does not say anything significant beyond Hymes's model of language competence. Hymes also added that psycholinguistic performance models are similar to his '*ability to use'* aspect and therefore part of communicative competence. An example of such a model, addressing the mental processing of language, is that of the psycholinguists Bialystok and Sharwood-Smith (1985). They substitute Hymes's term *communicative competence with* the terms *ability* and/or *proficiency* and make a distinction within this, between what they call *knowledge* and *control*, and the latter term

representing a psycholinguistic performance model .We also see that for them control is similar in meaning to *ability for use.*

Widdows on (1983, 1984, 1989) while engaging with and critiquing Hymes's work has also made some valuable contribution in developing the language proficiency model. Although Widdows on agrees with Hymes's model as well as his distinction between language knowledge and ability to use this language, he suggests some changes in the terminology used by Hymes in his model. He distinguishes *rules* that is knowledge of linguistic and sociolinguistics conventions similar to Hymes's *knowledge* from *procedures,* that is ways of going about the task, of making sense in particular contexts similar to aspects of Hymes's *ability for use.* He therefore distinguishes procedural or *communicative capacity*, which underpins the latter, from *communicative competence*, which he wishes to restrict to knowledge of rules.

Summarizing Hymes's language model, we conclude that Hymes in his model introduced a distinction between language *knowledge* and *ability for use* of language which helps us to understand subsequent discussions on models of language proficiency and of language performance tests. Language knowledge is relatively straightforward and in the later decade a consensus, has emerged about what aspects of this knowledge (of grammatical and other formal linguistic rules, sociolinguistic rules, etc.) it is appropriate to consider. *Ability for use*, on the other hand, is more difficult to understand, because this implies a range of cognitive and affective factors for performing communicative tasks which are not exclusive only to language.

Therefore, what we need to distinguish is, between *actual performance* or use of the language and the potential for that performance or as Hymes calls *ability for use*. Making this distinction between potential for performance and actual instances of performance is helpful when it comes to understanding discussions on communicative language testing and performance-based language tests.

Having looked at Hymes's model of performance we will now consider the two most important adaptations of Hymes's model of performance, the work of Canale and Swain and, of Bachman and Palmer which further discuss the assessment of language proficiency. Both Canale and Swain and Bachman and Palmer focus on the development of coherent models of language proficiency improving upon Hymes's model of communicative competence and performance.

Canale and Swain's (1980) model (subsequently refined in Canale 1983) proposed a model for second language performance and testing which dominated the scene for more than a decade. The most important feature of their model was its treatment of the domains of language knowledge as including, in addition to *grammatical* competence, *sociolinguistic* competence (following Hymes), *strategic* competence and (subsequently) *discourse* competence. According to them communicative competence consisted of

- *grammatical competence*

- *sociolinguistic competence*

- *strategic competence.*

Grammatical competence includes "knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology". (Canale and Swain, 1980, p. 29) Sociolinguistic *competence* includes knowledge of socio-cultural rules of use. *Strategic competence* refers to the possession of "coping" strategies (Canale and Swain, 1980, p.31) and is defined as one's capability to sustain communication using various verbal or nonverbal strategies when communication breakdowns occur. Together, these three sub-competencies make up what Canale and Swain call *communicative competence.* Therefore, their understanding of *communicative competence* is limited to only knowledge of language and does not include Hymes's notion of *ability for use* in their model of communicative competence. They argue their position by stating that they "doubt that there is any theory of human action that can adequately explicate ability for use" (Canale and Swain, 1980, p.7); and therefore, it cannot be included in their framework of communicative competence. Instead, they view *ability for use* as simply part of what they call *communicative performance*, which they define as "*the realization of these competenciesand their interaction in the actual production and comprehension of utterances"(*Canale and Swain, 1980, p.6) and subsequently as "*the actual demonstration of this knowledge",* i.e. of each of the four spheres of communicative competence in their definition in *real* second language situations and for *authentic* communication purposes. (Canale and Swain, 1980, p. 6) [Emphasis in original.] But it seems clear from the definition above that *communicative performance* as defined by them in fact refers to *actual use.*

Therefore, Canale and Swain agree with Hymes, that communicative competence includes knowledge of socio-cultural rules of use and they also introduce the notion of *strategic*

competence. Moreover, their concept of *communicative performance* refers to actual use of the language in real life situations.

There are some problems with the model (1980) proposed by Canale and Swain. In their model they do not acknowledge the need to take into account Hymes's concept of *ability for use*, but their discussion of strategic competence, which refers to the possession of "coping strategies" (Canale and Swain, 1980, p. 31), actually involves the ability or skill to use the language similar to Hymes's concept of *ability for use* of language.

Another problematic feature of the Canale and Swain model is acknowledged by Canale (l983), "The question of *how* these components interact with one another (or with other factors involved in actual communication) has been largely ignored here; that is, this theoretical framework is not a model of communicative competence, where model implies some specification of the manner and order in which the components interact and in which the various competencies are normally acquired". [Emphasis in original.] (p.12)

Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence has been questioned because of the exclusion of performance from their model of communicative competence. (See Spolsky, 1985 for a discussion on this). Shohamy (1988) also comments on the need for investigation of the interaction of the components of communicative competence: "Current approaches to second language testing view language in a communicative context. In order to describe the communicative oral trait, one needs to identify its main components and their internal relationship. A review of the literature, however, makes clear that the available communicative models mostly *list* their components without examining their relationship". [Emphasis in original] (p.6)

Bachman and Palmer (1982, 1984), Bachman (1988) and most importantly Bachman (1990), based their models of *Communicative Competence* on the model of Canale and Swain. Bachman (1990) proposed a model of *Communicative Language Ability* in which he distinguishes three components:

- Language competence

- Strategic competence

- Psycho physiological mechanisms/skills.

Bachman's 1990 model is a refinement and an elaboration of Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence. Bachman discusses Hymes's concept of *ability for use*, in his discussion of *strategic competence,* thus rectifying the problems with Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence. The model covers three basic areas: knowledge of language, here called *language competence*; some cognitive aspects of *ability for use*, here termed strategic competence; and a discussion of modalities of performance called *psycho physiological mechanisms*. This model discusses l*anguage competence* as "control of the rules of usage and use" (Bachman, 1990, p.105) and consists of two aspects: *organizational* and *pragmatic competence*. *Organizational competence* is further divided into *grammatical competence* that is being able to recognize and comprehend grammatically correct utterances and *textual competence* that is organizing them to form texts. *Pragmatic competence* includes *illocutionary competence* that is knowledge of the pragmatic conventions for performing language functions and *sociolinguistic competence* that is and knowledge of sociolinguistic rules of appropriateness.

Bachman's model is more coherent and deals with some of the inconsistencies of Canale and Swain's model. An important aspect of the model is in the way Canale's discourse competence is discussed. Discourse competence is broken up into *cohesion* and *coherence*. Cohesion goes to textual competence, which is a sub- section of organizational *competence*. Coherence is itself divided between *illocutionary competence* and *strategic competence*. Canale and Swain's use of the term *strategic competence* is reconceptualized by Bachman, as being part of *ability for use*, and not *knowledge*. In his model, Bachman distinguishes knowledge of and about language (*language competence*) from the cognitive skills involved in language use, which he calls *strategic competence*. Bachman (1990) elaborating on this says that:

"Communication involves a dynamic interchange between context and discourse, so that communicative language use is not characterized simply by the production or interpretation of texts, but by the relationship that obtains between a text and the context in which it occurs. The interpretation of discourse, in other words, requires the ability to utilize available language competencies to assess the context for relevant information and then match this information to information in the discourse. It is the function of strategic competence to match the new information to be processed with relevant information that is available (including pre suppositional

and real world knowledge) and map this onto the maximally efficient use of existing language abilities" (p. 102).

Therefore, Bachman's model includes issues that were not there in Canale and Swain's model and therefore it is more adequately equipped to measure the communicative competence of learners. A beginning has also been made to acknowledge the importance of the various aspects of *ability for use* in performance, although they mainly refer to general cognitive factors. Moreover, the separation of *strategic competence* from *language competence* is also an important step. The model also helps us to understand the concept of language performance in test settings, and thus enables assessment of communicative language ability appropriately. Spolsky, (1989) while commenting on Bachman's work said that although Bachman's model, like Canale and Swain's, is complex, it is not complex enough:

"I am forced to conclude, then, that the model of communicative competence proposed by Canale and Swain is oversimplified, as is the somewhat different three-component model described by Bachman" (p. 147).

There are still others who have discussed other models of language proficiency. Jones (1979) said that a performance test is not merely a basic language proficiency test, since here it is possible to cover up for lack of competency in one area by relatively greater level of proficiency in other areas (as cited in Mathew, 2008, p.20). Weir (1990) suggests that it is necessary to adequately describe the nature of communicative competence to develop appropriate tasks and criteria to measure this competence. Wesche (1992) has emphasized the inclusion of non-linguistic factors in assessing performance rather than attempting to develop context-neutral, universally fair language tests .According to Ellis (1994), communicative competence is "the knowledge that users of a language have internalized to enable them to understand and produce messages in the language" (p. 69).

Not long after Bachman's initial formulations, Bachman and Palmer (1996) made significant revisions to the earlier framework, and included in the model, the role of affective factors in language use; i.e. the role of non-cognitive factors underlying performance.

Primarily there are three kinds of changes made in the model. An affective component has been added; and *Strategic competence* has been reconceptualized as a set of *Meta cognitive strategies*.

Moreover some concepts have been given new terminology, for example, the former *Knowledge structures* is now *Topical knowledge. Illocutionary competence* which was a sub set of *Pragmatic knowledge* has been renamed *Functional knowledge.* A major inclusion is a new component called affective schemata (sometimes *affect*); and explained as 'the affective or emotional correlates of topical knowledge', and are characterized as 'knowledge structures in long-term memory'. It is significant to note that aspects of Hymes's *ability for use* are now being included in the model. Therefore, for the first time an attempt has been made to include affective or volitional factors explicitly in a model of second language communicative ability.

It is clear that all the models discussed above focus too much on the individual learner rather than the learner in interaction. Given the interactional nature of performance assessment, McNamara (1996) believed that we should also explore and include in the model the idea of performance involving social interaction. (Figure 2.3)
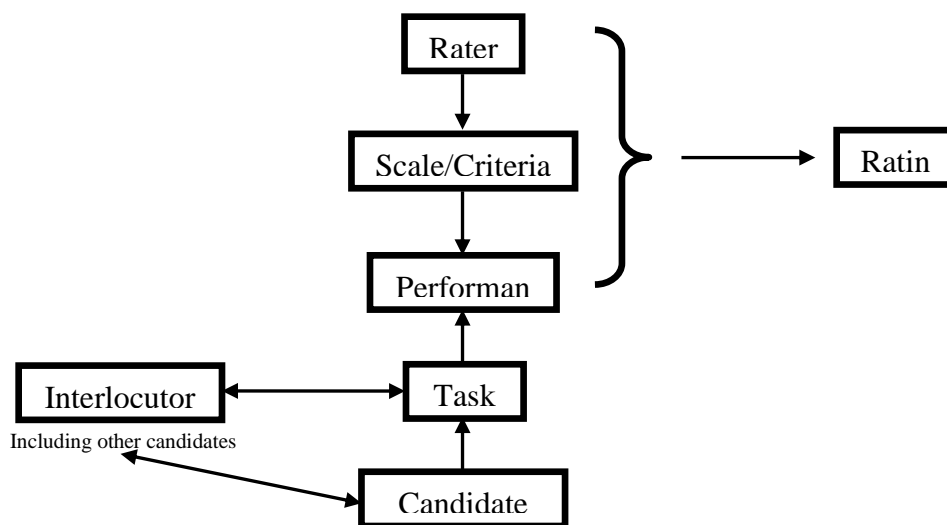

Fig. 2.3 'Proficiency' and its relation to performance (McNamara 1996, p.86)

Mathew (2008) summarizes the discussion on the development of language proficiency models by highlighting the main features in the concept of proficiency: According to her they are:

- "The *context* in which language use occurs or circumstances under which the communication takes place;

- Language users' *willingness* to exploit what they know and their *flexibility* to adapt to a given situation, with the *affective factor* facilitating or limiting this flexibility;

- Ability to *translate* one's competence into *actual performance* in contexts that correspond to *real life*;

- Performance as *more* than language proficiency ; and

- The importance of *non-linguistic factors* instead of *context-neutral, universally fair* language tests". (p.20)

Therefore, from the discussion above we can conclude that a proficient user of the language is one who can:

- Use language in different real life contexts encountered in day to day interactions.

- Demonstrate the ability to use appropriate language (competence) to express, interpret and negotiate meaning (performance).

- Have the ability to use language in meaningful and authentic situation

- Use language in socially constructed contexts to interact with others

- Use of strategic competence

- Ability to use affective factors to facilitate communication

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