

L2 Proficiency: A discussion of three influential models and a proposed model of L2 proficiency to facilitate improvements in language teaching and assessment.

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Abstract: *As the number of second language (L2) users continues to increase on a global scale, the need to highlight and understand what it means to be proficient in a L2 in addition to effective testing and assessment methods are significant factors in the teaching and assessment of L2 users. There are a myriad of factors that influence the use and assessment of languages, and as a result, research in the field of applied linguistics has resulted in several prominent and influential models of L2 proficiency. This paper presents a comparison of the influential models of L2 proficiency and their key components to facilitate an improved understanding of the meaning of communicative competence in various communicative contexts and to contribute to improvements in language teaching and the assessment of language learners. In addition, this paper proposes a model of L2 proficiency to facilitate improvements in the teaching and assessment of second languages.*

keywords: L2 proficiency, communicative competence, L2 assessment, L2 use, L2 learners

Introduction

An onerous task facing those in the field of language teaching and language assessment is to both define and understand what L2 proficiency is. Being proficient in a second language means different things to different people and L2 proficiency is influenced by many factors, which requires careful, clear and effective definition of key constructs when attempting to define L2 proficiency (Cummins, 2000). Ellis (2008) posits that it is vital to identify and understand the numerous factors that constrain or facilitate the use of language and understand their influence, in addition to effectively measuring language use to facilitate improvements in language teaching and the assessment of language ability. Moreover, Bachman (1990) posited that because there are a myriad of factors that affect language testing the identification and definition of the fundamental components of L2 proficiency and testing is vital.

Skehan (1998) stated that to facilitate improvements in defining constructs regarding L2 proficiency and to provide a means for improving and developing language testing and assessment, several models of language proficiency have been developed. Three influential models of L2 proficiency are discussed and compared and a synthesis of these models is proposed as a framework of L2 proficiency for instructional and assessment purposes.

Canale and Swain's framework of communicative competence

The communicative period of language proficiency began in the 1980s and viewed language as interactive, direct and authentic. This view of language required test takers to both produce and comprehend language in situations that replicated real life situations through oral and written assessment (Cummins, 2000). Shohamy (as cited in Cummins, 2000) stated that a major development in the field of language learning and testing which

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facilitated improvements in the understanding of language proficiency was Canale and Swain's framework of communicative competence.

Canale and Swain's framework of communicative competence, which was first introduced by Canale and Swain (1980) and then subsequently elaborated on by Canale (1983), was the first and most comprehensive model of communicative competence as it attempted to outline and describe the underlying principles of the structure of language that included a specific focus on discourse. Skehan (1998) noted that Canale and Swain's framework built on Hymes' (1972) much broader view of competence and facilitated this becoming an integral part of their framework (Peterwagner, 2005). Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) highlighted how the model facilitates assessments being generalised across a variety of contexts and how the framework broadened the scope of language testing theory.

Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1995) noted that Canale and Swain's framework posited four components of communicative competence, as shown in figure 1. These included grammatical competence or the knowledge of the rules and items that comprise a formal language system, sociolinguistic competence or the socially appropriate use of language, discourse competence or the ability to participate in coherent and cohesive interactions and strategic competence which is the ability to overcome difficulties when communication breaks down. Skehan (1998) highlights the importance of these constructs as they highlight a language user's underlying abilities, which facilitates these being related to contexts of actual language use. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2005) highlight the influence the model has had on language testing and communicative language use and how it has provided a starting point for other such models that include the work of Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996).

Figure 1

Canale & Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) Framework for Communicative Competence	
Component	Ability
Grammatical Competence	The knowledge of grammar, lexis, phonology.
Socio-linguistic Competence	Appropriate use of language eg. Student and teacher, student and student.
Discourse Competence	The ability to engage in coherent and cohesive discourse.
Strategic Competence	The ability to overcome difficulties that arise during interactions.

Bachman's communicative language ability (CLA) and the Bachman/Palmer model

Canale and Swain's framework of communicative competence was further developed by Bachman (1990) to produce Bachman's CLA model, Bachman and Palmer (1996) elaborated on the model, and several major changes were added (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell, 1995). Brindley (2005) highlighted the importance of the CLA model as a valuable contribution to the field of language testing as it effectively built on previous efforts and considers both language competence and language performance. The CLA model specifies that language proficiency required grammatical competence in addition to knowledge and understanding of how to use language in particular communicative contexts.

The CLA model elaborated on Canale and Swain's framework by affixing more detail to the components as well as employing a different structure of components in order to align them with current socio-cultural views of language (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2005). The model contributed to improved definition of CLA and facilitated

development of language testing and language test research through a greater understanding of key components of the model and contributed to researchers being able to more effectively measure L2 learner’s proficiency and to teachers being able to implement more effective language learning and assessment (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2005). Initially the CLA model was comprised of three components that included language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms, as shown in figure 2. The components of language knowledge, shown in figure 3 include organizational competence and pragmatic competence (Cummins, 2000).

Figure 2

Knowledge Structure	Strategic Competence	Language Knowledge
Knowledge of the world	Psychophysiological Mechanisms	Knowledge of Language
	Context of Situation	

Figure 3

Language Knowledge	
Organisational knowledge	Grammatical knowledge or the knowledge of the language and textual knowledge or the ability to combine various structures of language to form various types of texts.
Pragmatic knowledge	Lexical, functional and sociolinguistic knowledge. The knowledge of the meanings of words, communicative purposes of language and appropriate use of language in context respectively.

Significant factors that the model identifies include the influence of the test method on test performance and the ability for use (Niezgoda & Rover, 2001). Bachman (1990) posits that CLA incorporates competence in addition to the capacity for using that competence in appropriate and contextualized communicative language use. Furthermore, the model outlines a comprehensive framework that identifies and describes specific features that facilitate understanding of test method on test performance (Peterwagner, 2005).

Building on from Bachman (1990), Bachman and Palmer (1996) outlined several changes to the original model of CLA through changes in terms and several additions to the model as shown in figure 4. These include the inclusion of non-language variables, aspects of ability for use and a framework to facilitate an improved understanding of the influence the test method has on a test taker (Baker, 2006). The Bachman and Palmer model explicitly stated the need to consider language ability within an interactional framework of language use for language testing. Aspects of ability for use that included affective and knowledge schemata or non-language variables were added to the model. These facilitated improvements in the description of both language ability and performance in language tests (Cummins, 2000).

Language Competence				
Major types	Organisational Competence		Pragmatic Competence	
Categories	Grammatical Competence	Textual Competence	Illocutionary Competence	Sociolinguistic Competence
Subcategories	Areas	Text Forming Factors	Functions	Contributions to appropriateness
	Vocabulary	Cohesion	Ideational	Sensitivity to dialect/variety
	Morphology	Rhetorical Organisation	Manipulative	Sensitivity to register
	Syntax	Conversational Routines	Heuristic	Sensitivity to naturalness
	Phonology		Imaginative	Cultural reference
	Graphology			Figures of speech

The COE model of communicative competence

During the TOEFL 2000 project, extensive meetings were conducted between the TOEFL Committee of Examiners (COE) to improve language tests and to better identify test user needs, which resulted in a framework known as the COE model that represented components believed relevant for language use in academic contexts (Chappelle, Grabe & Berns, 1997). The model defines communicative language use in academic contexts with the two main components of the model being internal operations and context (Luoma, 2004). The model highlights the context's crucial role and effectively defines this term in addition to highlighting the features of the context that are relevant to language use. The COE model facilitates the development of a definition for language ability in various contexts and attributes performance to three sources, the context, the individual and their capacities and the interaction between these. The COE model defines context as two interacting factors that include an academic situation and performance and outlines the features expected to influence academic language use that include the setting, participants, task, text and topic (Chappelle, Grabe & Berns, 1997).

The model provides a framework that facilitates the assessment of specific aspects of communicative language proficiency in addition to the types of knowledge required by language users and factors both internal and external to the language user that influence language testing and language use (Luoma, 2004). Moreover, the model facilitates further discussion and development regarding language users, testing and factors that influence communicative language proficiency during learning and testing (Chappelle, Grabe & Berns, 1997).

A comparison of the communicative competence models

A comparison of the communicative competence models firstly highlights how the Canale and Swain framework ascribes little attention or detail to how the components outlined in the model interact. Furthermore, as Graham (1997) noted, the framework is essentially a static model that fails to identify the ways in which language users perform in various contextual situations. Conversely, Niezgodna and Rover (2001) highlight that the CLA model outlines and defines communicative competence as a dynamic system whereby knowledge structures and language competence contribute to strategic competence, which identifies and highlights the degree to which linguistic intentions are effectively executed.

The Canale and Swain framework does not implicitly outline how to relate the underlying abilities of language users to both processing and performance, or how to assess language demands across different contexts (Skehan, 1998). In contrast, the Bachman and Palmer model outlines that strategic competence interacts with

psychophysiological mechanisms, which then interact with the context of situation (Peterwagner, 2005). The COE model highlights the importance of context in communicative language proficiency and facilitates the identification of specific features that contribute to the definition and analysis of context (Chappelle, Grabe & Berns, 1997).

Language testers and language testing researchers continue to agree that clear and precise definition of key constructs and terminology regarding communicative language proficiency and language testing is required to ensure effective definition, designing, development and validation (Lazaraton & Taylor, 2007). The Canale and Swain framework has been criticised for using very broad terminology and failing to effectively define components and their interrelationships (Shohamy, 1997). Bachman (1990) argued for the need for more precise terminology regarding language proficiency and compared to Canale and Swain's framework, the CLA model incorporates more precise terminology (Peterwagner, 2005). Chappelle, Grabe and Berns, (1997) highlight the acknowledgement that the COE model makes to the previous work of Bachman (1990) and Hymes (1972) and the need for clear definitions of key constructs and precise terminology. The COE model defines the key constructs and outlines the interrelationships between these effectively to ensure effective test development, measurement and research (Luoma, 2004).

A significant factor that Canale and Swain were reaching towards and that Bachman outlined is that strategic competence, which Bachman (1990) separated from language and labeled metacognitive strategies is influenced by the test itself. Niezgodna and Rover (2001) emphasise this as a major advancement in language testing from Canale and Swain's framework as the Bachman and Palmer model identifies the major role of the test method characteristics. Furthermore, recognition of the influence that various test methods have on a language user's test performance is facilitated through the model and its recognition of non-language variables. Chalhoub-Deville and Deville (2005) highlighted these as significant developments as the model outlines a framework that describes specific features of test methods that facilitate improvements in language assessment. In addition, the use of affective and knowledge schemata in the model was recognised as an attempt to incorporate the concept of ability for use that was first noted by Hymes (1972) and that the Canale and Swain framework had failed to effectively include (McNamara, as cited in Brindley, 2005). Luoma (2004) stated that the COE model focuses on academic contexts and understanding the influence of context on language use in addition to components internal to the language user that seem to indicate some similarities to the Bachman and Palmer model.

A proposed framework for second language proficiency

The proposed framework for second language proficiency model incorporates components of the Bachman and Palmer model and the COE model. The proposed model aims to identify language user attributes and the relationship between the context, individual and performance to facilitate improvements in language teaching and assessment, which is vital in a world where language is used across various social, cultural and educational contexts (Luoma, 2004).

The model incorporates Bachman and Palmer's language and topical knowledge, affective and knowledge schemata, metacognitive strategies, which are the attributes of the individual, strategic competence in addition to the contextual and individual components of the COE model. The incorporation of language knowledge and metacognitive strategies is justified as Bachman and Palmer (1996) define language ability as consisting of language knowledge and metacognitive strategies. It is the metacognitive strategies that regulate the interactions

between language knowledge, topical knowledge and the individual characteristics in language use (Bachman, 2001). Moreover, these components of a proposed model are necessary as this type of model facilitates the adoption of an interactionist approach which identifies individual attributes, contextual components and interactions between these and how these influence performance (Chappelle, as cited in Bachman, 2001).

The Proposed Model- Key Components and Rationale		
Model	Component	Rationale
Bachman & Palmer	Language, topical knowledge, affective & knowledge schemata, strategic competence, metacognitive strategies	Attributes of L2 learners, regulation of interaction between components.
COE	Contextual and individual	Recognizes individual and context. Facilitates interactionist approach between learner's attributes and context – influence performance.

By adopting an interactionist approach to defining language ability, the model views performance as a combination of the language speaker's underlying traits, which are influenced by the context in which performance occurs. The proposed model incorporates the specification of the individual's traits and contextual components in addition to strategic competence or metacognitive strategies in order to mediate interactions between the individual and the contextual components. The inclusion of these facilitates the identification of the various components in language use and language testing interactions and an improved understanding of how these influence performance (Chappelle, as cited in Bachman, 2001).

The inclusion of Bachman and Palmer's topical knowledge and affective schemata highlight the need to focus on test method when designing language ability assessment (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Topical knowledge is also known as real-world knowledge and needs to be considered in the model as it facilitates task recognition and is involved in all language use and because it provides individuals with reference to the world (Bachman, 2001). Furthermore, the inclusion of affective schemata is vital as it facilitates ability for use which according to McNamara (as cited in Brindley, 2005) is lacking in many models, and which influences the way a test taker attempts and completes test tasks (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

The inclusion of the COE model facilitates a focus on important factors regarding the context and the language speaker that facilitate and influence performance as language ability interacts with and is influenced by the context (Chalhoub-Deville, as cited in Bachman, 2007). Chappelle (as cited in Bachman, 2007) posits that the capacity for language use interacts with the context to produce performance, which highlights the need to focus on the learner's attributes as ability and performance can vary across contexts. This results in a need to acknowledge the importance of the context on the individual and language performance and to produce language assessment that measure ability across various contexts (Bachman, 2001).

The inclusion of the COE model and its focus on the context facilitates the identification and a better understanding of the participants, setting, task, topic, text and how these influence performance and assessment of performance (Luoma, 2004). Moreover, the model outlines performance as a phenomenon that occurs within a situation that is characterised by linguistic and behavioural output that is what the language user contributes to the context (Chappelle, Grabe & Berns, 1997). A model of language proficiency must recognise the context and the components of the context and how the language user and the context interact to produce performance.

The inclusion of the COE model provides a framework that facilitates the hypothesising of the language abilities required in specific contexts, the information required for effective construct definition, which contributes to construct validity and test developers measuring what needs to be measured relevant to context. In addition, the inclusion of the COE model facilitates a model of second language proficiency the outlines future directions for test development, the importance of construct validity, the importance of the situation and elements of the situation that influence specific language abilities and language performance (Chappelle, Grabe & Berns, 1997).

Conclusions

The use of language across the many and various social, cultural and educational contexts requires a model of L2 proficiency that focuses on and identifies language user attributes and the relationship between the context, the individual and L2 performance to contribute to improvements in the teaching and assessment of language. The implementation of Bachman and Palmer's model and the COE model to form a proposed model of L2 proficiency facilitates improvements in language teaching and testing through an interactional approach that identifies and defines individual attributes in addition to recognizing the effect of the test method on test performance. The proposed model facilitates language teaching incorporating and focusing on the context of language use and the various components that influence language use as facilitate proficient language use across various contexts. Finally, the proposed model includes a focus on context in language use and assessment, which contributes to the understanding of contextualized language use, ability and performance. Through the use of the proposed model, assessors of L2 language learners are better able to identify the types of contexts that L2 language learners must perform in as well as recognizing and understanding the influence of the assessment procedures on language testing to ensure language testing incorporates contextualized language performance and testing that reflects the real world situations in which L2 language learners are required to perform in.

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