

Theorizing the Language Ability and Language Assessment

ZHAO Congmin

North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

This paper reviews the major theorizing of language ability in relation to language assessment. The evolving conceptualizations of language competence or ability directly affect testing and assessment practices which place construct in the central position. The modern history of language testing displays parallel and corresponding developments.

Keyword: competence, proficiency, performance, language assessment

Introduction

Understanding what language ability entails is a fundamental conceptual issue in second language or foreign language learning, teaching, and testing and assessment. Language competence, proficiency, or ability is a construct accessible only through inference from language use behavior in performing listening, speaking, reading, or writing tasks (Stern, 1983, p. 346). The centrality of constructs (what is measured by tests) requires test developers to understand what language is and what is involved to learn and use language and on the basis of such knowledge decide how to assess people's abilities (Alderson & Banerjee, 2002). In other words, test developers need to become applied linguists, knowing the latest and most accepted theories of language description, language acquisition, and language use and need to know how to operationalise these in terms of how to elicit test-takers' language and language use (Alderson & Banerjee, 2002). Therefore, the understanding of language ability is fundamental to language testing and assessment.

Language ability has traditionally been considered to consist of four skills distinguished in terms of channel (audio, visual) and mode (productive, receptive) (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 55). Yet, conceptualizations of language ability evolve with theoretical developments and empirical research in linguistics and applied linguistics, such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics. Conceptions of language competence shift from linguistic competence to communicative competence and language assessment makes corresponding changes.

Shifting Conceptions of Language Competence

As the father of modern linguistics, Saussure made an important distinction between *langue* and *parole*. *Langue*, as a grammatical system (Saussure, 1959, p. 13), is "a self-contained whole and a principle of classification...both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions" and should be used as the norm of all other manifestations of language (p. 9). *Parole* is the executive aspect of language by individuals (p. 13) and the actual use of the language system. Separating *langue* from *parole* also involves separating what is social and essential from what is individual, accessory, and somewhat accidental (p. 14). *Langue* is of primary importance in the study of language. It is a well-defined object in the heterogeneous facts of language and can be studied separately (pp. 14-15). The subject matter of linguistics comprises all the

manifestations of language and the task of linguistics should describe and trace the development of all the “languages” (p. 6).

Chomsky makes a similar distinction between competence and performance. Competence which is “the intrinsic tacit knowledge ... that underlies actual performance” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 140) refers to “the ability of the idealized speaker-hearer to associate sounds and meanings strictly in accordance with the rules of his language” (Chomsky, 2006, p. 103). A person with command of a language can be said to have internalized the system of language rules and have developed linguistic competence in that language (p. 102). However, performance, the actual observed use of language, involves the system of linguistic rules and many other factors as well. Extralinguistic factors, such as ideas about the speaker and the situation and principles of cognitive structure, are fundamental elements that can determine how speech is produced, identified, and understood (pp. 102-103). In the study of a language, the factors interacting with underlying competence must be excluded to determine actual performance and the grammar of a language serves as a model of idealized competence and the primary goal of linguistic study (p. 103). The underlying competence can be interpreted as learner’s tacit knowledge of a language in ideal situations and is referred to as a system of generative processes.

Saussure and Chomsky are similar in their linguistic inquiry in that they focus on linguistic analysis in a pure and abstract form while disregarding the infinite varieties of language use in their option for the study of langue and competence as the proper subject of linguistics (Stern, 1983, p. 219). On the other hand, sociolinguists take the opposite position and view the variability of parole and performance as the substance of linguistics (p. 219). Sociolinguists engage in ethnographic study of communication and identify speech acts and functions of language. Discourse analysis and sociolinguistics add a pragmatic and sociocultural dimension to linguistic competence, together constituting communicative competence.

A sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1970) suggested transcending Chomsky’s dichotomy of competence and performance (p. 281) and proposes “competence for use” (p. 279) which comprises the knowledge of communicative competence (CC). This knowledge enables four questions (p. 281) to be answered and is referred to as the four parameters of CC. The first question is “whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible”, involving linguistic grammaticality and non-verbal and cultural grammaticality. The second is “whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available”, concerning psycholinguistic factors, such as “memory limitation, perceptual devices, effects of properties such as nesting, embedding, branching and the like” (p. 285). The third is “whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to the context in which it is used and evaluated” with support being provided by pragmatics and discourse analysis (K. Johnson & H. Johnson, 2001, p. 64). The fourth one is “whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails”, with the actual or probable occurrence of language forms being involved (p. 65).

CC refers to the intuitive mastery of language in native speakers by using and interpreting language appropriately in the process of interaction and in relation to the social context and includes linguistic competence, but emphasizes the intuitive grasp of social and cultural rules and meanings. However, it seems impossible for non-native speakers to acquire CC due to the complex of the language rule system (Stern, 1983, p. 229). Therefore, the CC of second language learner must be conceived somewhat differently as Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) do.

Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) presented the best known model of CC with four elements: Grammatical competence concerns with sentence level grammar (Canale, 1983), discourse competence is added

by Canale later and involves intersentential relationships, referring to the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances (Canale, 1983), sociolinguistic competence involves knowledge of sociocultural rules of language and discourse (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 29), and strategic competence refers to verbal or non-verbal communication strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence (p. 30).

Stern (1983) offered a complete summary of different interpretations of language proficiency (p. 356). The concept of second language proficiency can be interpreted in two sets of options. The first set of options involves the levels of proficiency, that is, the varying degrees of mastery, progressing from the basic level to advanced or near-native level, as is impressionistically examined by rating scales, measured by standardized tests, and empirically investigated by interlanguage studies (p. 357).

The second set of options is theoretically based and defines the important components or characteristics of proficiency in terms of linguistic content and/or behavioral or psychological content categories. Proficiency has been conceptualized as an underlying linguistic competence which is embodied by the features of phonology, morphology, syntax, or discourse, such as Oller's (1976) expectancy grammar: The anticipation of language use whether in receptive skills or productive skills is a hallmark of proficiency (Stern, 1983, p. 349). Proficiency is interpreted by some as a twofold concept, being divided into linguistic and communicative competence, such as Cummins' (1979) distinction between the more academic and the more communicative element: "cognitive/academic language proficiency" (CALP) and "basic interpersonal c skills" (BICS). Following this distinction, language proficiency tests may assess the academic, analytical, or explicit aspect of proficiency but inadequately address the communicative or creative aspects of proficiency (Stern, 1983, p. 353). A threefold division can be seen in Canale and Swain's (1980) grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. Stern (1983) conceptualized first language or second language competence or proficiency as consisting of four aspects: the intuitive mastery of language forms (formal mastery) and of the linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social cultural meanings of language forms (semantic mastery), the capacity to use language with maximum attention to communication and minimum attention to form (communicative capacity), and creativity of language use (p. 357). Another fourfold interpretation is the traditional division of language proficiency into the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Examples of a multiple conceptualization of proficiency include rating scales and language tests. A typical example is skills and components models which are proposed in the early 1960s by Lado (1961) and Carroll (1961; 1968) and is influential since the second half of last century (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 55). This model of language proficiency makes a distinction between the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and language knowledge components, such as grammar, vocabulary, phonology/graphology.

Development of Language Assessment

The evolving theorizations of language competence or ability directly affect testing and assessment practices. The modern history of testing displays parallel and corresponding developments. The first period in language testing is the psychometric-structuralist period and has its heyday in the 1960s (McNamara, 2003, p. 13). Early testing theories view language knowledge as consisting of formal features of the language system under the influence of structural linguistics, and the testing of separate individual points of language knowledge is practiced. The discrete point testing practice is reinforced by psychometric theory and practice and the emerging science of measuring cognitive abilities. The four language macroskills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are also

tested to supplement discrete point tests, so that the integrated nature of performance can be reflected in a test battery. The psychometric-structuralist movement witnesses the rise of the first carefully designed and standardized tests in the 1960s, such as TOEFL (Brown, 2006, p. 20).

The discrete point tests fail to address the use of the formal linguistic system to achieve communication and this realization leads to the development of integrative and pragmatic tests which attempt to combine systematic language features with the understanding of context (McNamara, 2003, p. 15). In the 1970s, John Oller presented a new view of language and language use, focusing less on language knowledge and more on psycholinguistic processing of language use (p. 15). He also proposes the Unitary Competence Hypothesis that test performance depends on the same underlying capacity in the learner, that is, the ability to integrate grammatical, lexical, contextual, and pragmatic knowledge, and argues for the cloze test as being more economical and efficient, which becomes very popular in 1970s and early 1980s (pp. 15-16). Another example of integrative tests is dictation.

Communicative language testing is strongly influenced by Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence. Communicative competence theory "represents a profound shift from a psychological perspective on language, which sees language as an internal phenomenon, to a sociological one, focusing on external, social functions of language" (McNamara, 2003, p. 16). Typical communicative tests include role plays, problem-solving tests, and group tests and performance and task-based assessment are developed as a natural component of this testing movement (Brown, 2006, p. 21).

Bachman's Framework of Communicative Language Ability and Test Methods

New models of communicative competence emerge and exploration in language assessment does not stop. Bachman's (1991) list of advances in language testing in the last decade includes the development of a multi-componential view of language ability, recognizing the influence of test method and test taker characteristics on test performance, and the development of communicative language tests in accordance with increased communicative language teaching.

In response to the call of language testing specialists for the incorporation of a theoretical framework of language proficiency with the methods and technology to measure it (Upshur, 1979; Henning, 1984; Bachman & Clark, 1987), Bachman (1990) developed the framework of communicative language ability, which offers a means to characterize the traits or constructs constituting the "what" of language testing, and the framework of test methods, which constitute the "how" of language testing (p. 111). The Council of Europe's Common European Framework exposes a model of language, language use, and language learning explicitly based on the Bachman model (Alderson & Banerjee, 2002).

The communicative language ability proposed by Bachman (1990) consists of three components of language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms, which interact with the language use context and language user's knowledge (p. 84).

Language competence comprises mainly components of specific language knowledge utilized in communication and is divided into organizational and competence. Organizational competence concerns the relationships among signs and their referents (Bachman, 1990, p. 89), involves controlling the formal structure of language to recognize or produce grammatical sentences, understanding their propositional content, and ordering them to form text, and is subdivided into grammatical and textual competence. Grammatical competence refers to the competencies involved in language usage, such as knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax,

and phonology/graphology. Textual competence involves the knowledge of the conventions for connecting utterances to form a text according to rules of cohesion and rhetorical organization. Pragmatic competence concerns the relationships between the language users and the context of communication (p. 89) and includes illocutionary competence (knowledge of pragmatic conventions for performing acceptable language functions) and sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of sociolinguistic conventions for performing appropriate language functions) (p. 90). The former includes the ideational, manipulative, heuristic, and imaginative functions of language while the latter is the sensitivity to differences in dialect or variety and register and to naturalness and the ability to interpret cultural references and figures of speech.

Strategic competence has three components. The assessment component involves identifying the information needed to achieve the communicative goal of the context, determining the language competencies available, ensuring interlocutor's abilities and knowledge, and evaluating the extent to which the communicative goal has been achieved (p. 100). The planning component retrieves items from language competence and formulates a plan for achieving the communicative goal (p. 101). The execution component implements the plan by exercising psychophysiological mechanisms in the modality and channel appropriate to the context and the communicative goal (p. 103).

Performance on language tests varies as a function of not only test takers' language ability and the test method, but also individual attributes, such as their cognitive and affective characteristics, world knowledge, and factors of age, sex, educational, and socio-economic background which are liable to lead to test bias (pp. 113-114). The aspects of the test method provide much of the context of language tests (p. 113) and the test method can be seen as analogous to context of situation or the speech event (p. 111).

The framework of test method facets consists of five major categories: the testing environment (physical conditions, personnel, and time of testing), the test rubric (test organization, time allocation, and instructions), the nature of the input test takers receive (format and language), the nature of the expected response to the input, and the relationship between input and response (reciprocal, nonreciprocal, or adaptive) (p. 119). It is useful for analyzing language learning and assessment tasks.

Bachman and Palmer's (2010) Language Use Ability

The newer conception of language ability is Bachman and Palmer's (2010) language use ability. Language use can be non-reciprocal or reciprocal and involves interactions among attributes of language users and interactions between the language user and characteristics of language use situations, being internally and externally interactive (p. 34). The attributes of language users are classified into the core attribute of language ability and peripheral attributes which include personal attributes (age, foreign language aptitude, personality, cognitive style, and language use strategies), topical knowledge, affective schemata, and cognitive strategies. Components of the language ability remain basically the same as those of the language competence in Bachman's (1990) theoretical model whereas strategic competence is modified. It has a separate goal-setting component that decides what to do and a planning component that decides how to use what there is (Cohen, 2005, p. 120); the term of assessment is replaced by appraisal which involves what is needed, what resources are available, and how well one has done; and the execution component is removed for involving neurological and physiological processes (p. 120). This framework of language use ability can be used in the design of language assessments for defining the construct.

Conclusion

The concept of language ability or competence undergoes significant evolutions and knowledge on language, language use, and language ability can contribute to making informed decisions on instruction and assessment, such as on matters of making the course syllabus, selecting teaching material and methods, and developing assessment tasks.

References

- Alderson, J. C., & Banerjee, J. (2002). Language testing and assessment (Part 2). *Lang. Teach*, 35, 79-113.
- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bachman, L. F. (1991). What does language testing have to offer? *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(4), 671-704.
- Bachman, L. F., & Clark, J. L. D. (1987). The measurement of foreign/second language proficiency. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 490, 20-33.
- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (2010). *Language assessment practice: Developing language assessments and justifying their use in the real world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, J. D. (2006). *Testing in language programs: A comprehensive guide to English language assessment*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- Brown, H. D., & Abeywickrama, P. (2013). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices* (2nd ed.). Beijing: Tsinghua University Press.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, 1-47.
- Canale, M. (1983). On some dimensions of language proficiency. In J. W. Oller Jr. (Ed.), *Issues in language testing* (pp. 333-342). Cambridge, MA: Newbury House.
- Carroll, J. B. (1961). Research on teaching foreign languages. *Publications of the language laboratory*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan.
- Carroll, J. B. (1968). The psychology of language testing. In A. Davies (Ed.), *Language testing symposium: A psycholinguistic approach* (pp. 46-69). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.
- Chomsky, N. (2006). *Language and mind* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, A. D. (2005). *Assessing language ability in the classroom*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Cummins, J. (1979). Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimal age question and some other matters. *Working Papers in Bilingualism*, 19, 197-205.
- Henning, G. (1984). Review of Arthur Hughes and Don Porter (Eds.): Current developments in language testing. *Language Testing*, 1-2, 237-41.
- Hymes, D. (1970). On communicative competence. In J. J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics* (pp. 53-73). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Johnson, K., & Johnson, H. (2001). *Encyclopedic dictionary of applied linguistics: A handbook for language teaching*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Lado, R. (1961). *Language testing: The construction and use of foreign language tests*. London: Longman.
- McNamara, T. F. (2003). *Language testing*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Oller, J. W. Jr. (1976). Evidence for a general proficiency factor: An expectancy grammar. *Die Neueren Sprachen*, 2, 165-174.
- Saussure, F. (1959). *Course in general linguistics*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Stern, H. H. (1983). *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Upshur, J. A. (1979). Functional proficiency theory and a research role for language tests. In E. J. Bri ère and F. B. Hinofotis (Eds.), *Concepts in language testing: Some recent studies* (pp. 75-100). Washington, DC: TESOL.