

THE STRUCTURE OF LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

The language theories of the 1960s (e.g. Lado, 1961; Carroll, 1968) tended to center on language skills and components. The skills comprise listening, speaking, reading and writing and the components of knowledge comprise grammar, vocabulary, phonology and graphology. These earlier models did not indicate how skills and knowledge were integrated (Bachman, 1990). For example, how does listening differ from speaking? How does reading differ from writing? It has also been suggested that such skill and knowledge models tend to ignore the sociocultural and sociolinguistic context of language (Hymes, 1972a,b). Earlier models fail to probe the competence of 'other' people in a conversation. In a conversation, there is negotiation of meaning between two or more people. Real communication involves anticipating a listener's response, understandings and misunderstandings, sometimes clarifying one's own language to ensure joint understanding and relationships of similar and different status and power (Paulston, 1992a).

Earlier models also tended to be purely linguistic and ignore the settings and social contexts where language is used. A more sociolinguistic approach will examine actual content and context of communication called 'speech acts' or the 'ethnography of communication'. This approach includes looking at the rules of dual language usage among bilinguals, their shared knowledge in conversation, and the culturally, socially and politically determined language norms and values of bilingual speech events.

Various models of language competence have been developed. Two major examples will be briefly outlined; both have implications for the definition and measurement of bilingual proficiency, and both illustrate relatively comprehensive considerations of language competence.

Canale and Swain's Model of Language Competence

Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983, 1984) suggest that language competence has four components: a **linguistic** component (e.g. syntax and vocabulary); a **sociolinguistic** component (e.g. use of appropriate language in different situations); a **discourse** component (e.g. ability to initiate and participate in sustained conversations and read sizable written texts); and a **strategic** component (e.g. improvisation with language when there is difficulty in communication).

Just as Oller's (1979) 'one factor' proposal has been criticized for not recognizing specific language areas, so Canale and Swain (1980) have been criticized for not showing whether or how the four components are inter-related, even if they can be subsumed into one overall global factor. Also, the description of a structure for language competence does not always relate easily to tests. Testing sociolinguistic and strategic competence is, of essence, likely to be difficult, contested and elusive, although not impossible, as Bachman (1990) reveals.

Bachman's Model of Language Competence

A second major model of language competence has been proposed by Bachman (1990). Bachman's model is valuable in that it considers both **language competence** and **language performance**. The model includes not only grammatical knowledge but also knowledge of how to use language in a particular communicative context. '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' (Bachman, 1990, p. 84).

To fully define, refine and enable the testing of communicative competence, Bachman (1990) has proposed a model that is summarized in the following table.

Language Competence

- (1) Organizational Competence
 - (i) Grammatical (e.g. Syntax, Vocabulary)
 - (ii) Textual (e.g. Written and oral cohesion)
- (2) Pragmatic Competence
 - (i) Illocutionary Competence (e.g. speech strategies, language functions)
 - (ii) Sociolinguistic Competence (e.g. sensitivity to register, dialect, cultural figures of speech)

To explain the table: for Bachman (1990), communicative competence is composed of two major components: organizational competence and pragmatic competence. **Organizational competence** is broken down into two parts, grammatical competence and textual competence. Grammatical competence comprises knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, morphology and phonology/graphology. For example, a person needs to arrange words in a correct order in a sentence with appropriate endings (e.g. high, higher, highest).

Textual competence involves 'the knowledge of the conventions for joining utterances together to form a text, which is essentially a unit of language — *spoken or written* — consisting of two or more utterances or sentences' (Bachman, 1990, p. 88).

Pragmatic competence is composed of two sub-parts: illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Following Halliday (1973), Bachman (1990) lists four language functions as part of illocutionary competence: ideational (the way we convey meanings and experiences), manipulative (using language in an instrumental way to achieve ends), heuristic (the use of language to discover new things about our world and solving problems), and the imaginative function (using language beyond the 'here and now' (e.g. for humor or fantasy).

The second part of pragmatic competence is sociolinguistic competence. Sociolinguistic competence is sensitivity to the context where language is used, ensuring that language is appropriate to the person or the situation. This may entail sensitivity to differences in local geographical dialect, sensitivity to differences in register (e.g. the register of boardroom, baseball, bar and bedroom). Sociolinguistic competence also refers to sensitivity to speaking in a native-like or natural way. This will include cultural variations in grammar and vocabulary (e.g. Black English). Another part of sociolinguistic competence is the ability to interpret cultural references and figures of speech. Sometimes, to understand a particular conversation, one needs inner cultural understanding of a specific language. A Welsh figure of speech such as 'to go round the Orme' (meaning 'to be long-winded') is only fully understandable within local northern Welsh cultural idioms.

In order to represent language as a dynamic process, Bachman (1990) argues that the listed components given in the table above interact with each other. He therefore adds to the model the notion of **strategic competence** where individuals constantly plan, execute and assess their communication strategies and delivery.

Since competence in a language is viewed as an integral part of language performance and not abstracted from it, tests of language competence cannot just use pencil and paper tests, but also need to investigate the language of genuine communication. Instead of tests that are artificial and stilted (e.g. language dictation tests), communicative performance testing involves creative, unpredictable, contextualized conversation.

This suggests that it will be difficult to measure communicative proficiency in an unbiased, comprehensive, valid and reliable way. Simple classroom tests are likely to be but a partial measure of the bilinguals' everyday performance. In testing communicative competence, Bachman (1990) adds a list of features that influence measured communicative competence in an academic context. Such external influences are likely to affect the language competence profile of the person tested, often in a negative way. This list includes:

- (1) Test Environment (e.g. effect of the tester; the scheduling and place of the test).
- (2) Test Rubric (e.g. layout of the test, time allocation, language of the instructions, details as to what constitutes an appropriate response).
- (3) Format of the Test (e.g. written, 'taped', 'live' testing).
- (4) Nature of the Test Language (e.g. chosen topic, context embedded or context reduced communication).
- (5) Nature of the Test Response (e.g. multiple choice or self-created; written or spoken; concrete or abstract; allowing non-verbal communication or not).

CONCLUSION

The topic of measurement often follows from a discussion of definitions, distinctions, dimensions and categorizations. Just as dimensions and categorizations can never capture the full flavor of the global nature of bilingualism, so measurement usually fails to capture fully various conceptual dimensions and categorizations. Just as the statistics of a football or an ice hockey game do not convey the richness of the event, so language tests and measurements are unlikely to fully represent an idea or theoretical concept. Complex and rich descriptions are the indispensable partner of measurement and testing. The stark statistics of the football or ice hockey game and the colorful commentary are complementary, not incompatible.

Language background scales to measure language usage and a plethora of tests to measure language proficiency exist. The latter includes norm and criterion referenced language tests, self-rating scales and language dominance tests. Particular attention in this chapter has been given to criterion referenced tests measuring mastery of specific language objectives. Suitable for both first and second languages, sometimes based on theoretical principles, sometimes eclectic, such tests tend to relate directly to the process of teaching and learning.

The chapter considered theories of the structure of language competence. Such theories join the first two chapters, integrating issues of definition with ideas about measurement. In particular, the focus has been on linking a linguistic view of language competence with a communicative view. Language can be decomposed into its linguistic constituents (e.g. grammar, vocabulary). It is also important to consider language as a means of making relationships and communicating information. This important dualism will follow us through the book: ability and use; the linguistic and the social; competence and communication.