

Critical Analysis of the Models of Language Proficiency with a Focus on Communicative Models

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Abstract—Production of a clear-cut and comprehensive framework for the sake of evaluation purposes has been one of the most challenging issues in the realm of language assessment. Over the past decades, notable effort has been made to put forward models to practically define and theoretically specify the construct of language proficiency. To accomplish this, theorists have drawn on different epistemological sources such as empirical research, narrative accounts as well as introspective and retrospective analysis of language related data. The objective of this review is to conduct a critical analysis of the validity and practicality of these models and also to indicate the contributions as well as the drawbacks of these models from different standpoints. The analysis has been done in conformity with the widely accepted paradigms of socio-cultural and communicative orientations toward language within the field of language assessment.

Index Terms—construct validity, language proficiency, communicative competence

I. INTRODUCTION

Language assessment as the distinguished subfield of applied linguistics has witnessed immense and multi-dimensional advancements in theory and practice in recent decades. (Alderson, 1991; Bachman, 2000; Davies, 1990; Skehan, 1991 to name a few). Most of these improvements have been informed by the theoretical and practical accomplishments in the field of language learning and teaching theories. In the realm of language assessment, the definitive characterization of language proficiency has been one of the most controversial and cumbersome issues that has been dealt with from diverse aspects by scholars. One of the noteworthy classifications was offered by Spolsky (1985) who maintained that language testing has witnessed three different eras in its evolutionary path including, the traditional era (from ancient china until the emergence of structural linguistics), psycholinguistic-structuralist era, and sociolinguistic-communicative era(emergence of socio-cultural and extra-linguistic paradigms).

Within the scope of the traditional era, there was no clear-cut definition of language proficiency and essay type as well as open-ended questions were mostly adopted for the evaluation purposes. In a different vein, the scientific structuralist period was largely influenced by structural linguists as (Bloomfield, 1933; Sausor, 1966). Lado(1961) drawing on the structuralists' conceptualization of language, put forward his pioneer skill-component model which was the first endeavor for the precise definition of language proficiency. It did not take a long time that the tenets of the structuralism were harshly criticized by Chomsky (1965). In his account, structuralists can not explain the creative aspect of language as well as the universal characteristics shared among all languages.

In his conceptualization, the rather quick mastery of learning the complex structures of language, despite the insufficient input from their parents and the surrounding environment was another proof for the inadequacy of structuralists' account of language learning. For this reason, Chomsky coined the term "linguistic competence" which shared some commonalities with Sausors' notorious term of 'Langue'. Chomsky rejected the significance of language performance (believing in the idealized speaker and listener) because he maintained that it was widely constrained by limited cognitive processing capacity, lapses and tips of tongue. Chomskys' disregard of contextual factors in formulating language was fiercely challenged by Hymes' (1972) landmark article which indicated how socio-cultural factors impact on the formation of language. In a similar line, functional linguists such as (Halliday, 1964, 1973; Widdowson, 1978; Munby; 1978; van Ek 1977) instilled new outlooks into the field of language testing. Paradigm shift from generative grammar to functionalists' account of language gave birth to new communicative competence models. In this regard, the most referenced model was the one adopted by Cannale and Swine (1980) which was warmly supported by scholars such as (Haliday, 1973; Widdowson, 1978; spolsky, 1985, to name a few). The subsequent

models offered by (Bachman 1990, Celica Murcia et al, 1995; Bachman & Palmer: 1996) added to the complexity of the theoretical definition of the construct of language proficiency. These subsequent models made tremendous effort to indicate the multi-faceted interactions among different components of language. Perhaps it was due to these inherent complexities that McNamara (1991) suggested not to open the 'Pondera box' of language proficiency.

Taking these points into account, the present paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the models of language proficiency and communicative proficiency from a critical point of view. This paper has chronologically analyzed the mainstream models of language proficiency with a focus on their strength and weakness in mirroring the essence of language in a detailed and simplified style to involve wider spectrum of the EFL community.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

In the rather short history of language testing, different models of language proficiency have been widely informed by the paradigm shifts in diverse fields of psychology, sociology, and second language studies. The trends including Behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, Interactionism, task-based teaching and so forth have widely contributed to the expansion of the models in terms of clarity and scope. These models have been chronologically introduced and analyzed in this section.

A. Skill-component Model

Lado's (1961) breakthrough conceptualization from linguistic competence led to a theoretical framework for explaining the concept of language proficiency. Drawing on the structuralist linguistics, Lado defined language proficiency as a system constituted of the four separate skills of listening, speaking, writing and reading as well as a set of highly overlapped and interrelated components involving phonemes, morphemes, phrases, clauses and sentences. The introduction of this model as Farhady (1981) maintained was a breakthrough in the sense that for the first time it was possible for testers to evaluate test takers' performances base on a unified and structural model. The manifestations of this model were the appearance of discreet point type tests in the literature of formal assessment. In these types of tests, one component of language is assessed separately from others because language is not deemed as a uniformed whole but a set of separate components.

A host of scholars (Carroll, 1961; Oller, 1979; Farhady, 1980, Spolsky, 1985, etc.) voiced criticism of the weakness of these tests to assess the learner's performance in real life context. According to Bachman (1990) this model did not indicate how skills and the knowledge of components are related to each other. It was not clear whether skills are the simple manifestation of the knowledge component or whether they are different qualitatively in other ways. For instance, with respect to questions such as "Does reading differ from writing only in that it involves interpretation, rather than expression?" it remains unproductive and even misleading. Another serious limitation of skills - component model as Motallebzadeh&Baghai (2011) argued was its failure to recognize the full context of language use. In the same line, Morrow (1979) believed that the atomistic approach to language is not correct because language is a whole different from its components.

B. Ollers' Integrative Model

The introduction of the integrative tests was the outcome of the setbacks in the Lados' model that led applied linguists as (Carrol, 1965, Oller, 1979) to introduce a new type of language proficiency model called "integrative approach". According to Oller (1979) language is integrative in practice and unitary in nature. Being under the influence of Gestalt psychology as well as generative grammar, he maintained that language as a whole is different from its components; consequently, Ollers' approach toward language was holistic as he rejected the divisibility of language into skills. Dictation type tests, oral interview and cloze tests were manifestations of his approach toward language because they included the simultaneous processing of more than one skill which is similar to the use of language in real life. He also referred to the new test of language proficiency as pragmatic and integrative tests which are intended to tap extra-linguistic factors in the comprehension and production of language.

There were some flaws in Integrative tests, for instance, Alderson (1991) points out that the results of cloze tests are not the true indication of learners' ability since their performance was affected by the number of deleted items and where the deletions begin. Morrow (1979) states that neither cloze tests nor diction type tests allow for spontaneous production by candidate, relying instead on the examiner for the language input. Similarly, unitary trait hypothesis was criticized for both methodological and theoretical drawbacks. Ollers' advocacy of using principal component analysis was questioned by (Farhady 1983: Vollnmer & Song ,1983). The theory was critiqued since Oller's adopted technique would allow the incorporation of error variance into the analysis and then overestimation of the first factor.

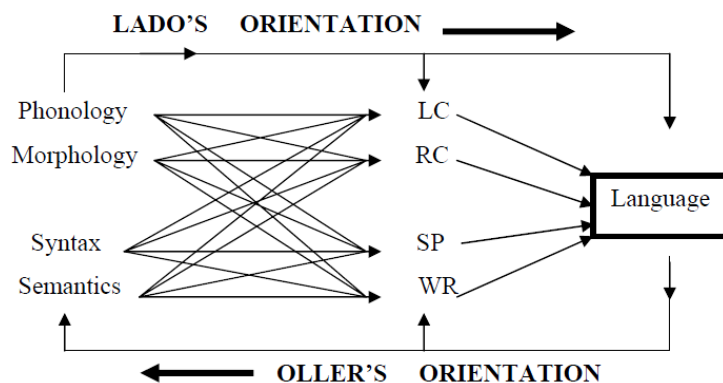


Figure 1: Model of language proficiency based on Lado (1961) and Oller (1979)

C. Cannale and Swine Communicative Competence Model (1980)

The increasing pessimism toward the slogans of the structuralists' and psycholinguistic's models of language proficiency informed by Hymes' (1972) sociolinguistic approach as well as the Hallidays' "functional grammar" toward language, ushered in innovative trends in defining language ability. Based on Cannel and swine (1980), communicative competence is of central concern in forming theoretical framework for language ability. In this model, language is made up of different components some of which were not touched upon in the previous model. In their conceptualization, socio-linguistic competence along with linguistic and strategic competence interact with each other in formulating communicative competence.

In this model, grammatical competence is not much different from chomskyan linguistic competence. It includes the knowledge of lexical items, rules of morphology, syntax, sentence grammar, semantics and phonology. Criticizing the purely functional- based approaches of VanEk (1977) and Munby (1978), Cannale& swine (1980) underpinned the central role of linguistic knowledge for fulfilling communicative intentions. As a proof, they referred to many instances in which the learners had vast sociolinguistic knowledge but due to the lack of linguistic resources, they could not fulfill their intended communicative goals in real life context.

By adding the branch of sociolinguistic competence to their model, Cannal& swine (1980) maintained that language is not formed in vacuum and it is not just a mental phenomenon as Chomsky claims (Adel & Hashemi, 2015; Ghaniabadi & Hashemi, 2015). They referred to savignons' (1973) study, in which the groups whose focus was on the formal aspects of language use scored much lower than those who were both trained linguistically and communicatively.

In their proposed model, sociolinguistic competence is made up of two sets of rules: socio-cultural rules of use and rules of discourse. The socio-cultural rules of use involve the appropriate use of vocabulary, register, politeness and style in the related context. Through adopting these rules, it is feasible to produce appropriate utterances b on the basis of the contextual factors. It is noteworthy that mere grammatical sentences are not sufficient for interaction in real life context. It should be noted that the primary focus of these rules is on the extent to which certain propositions and communicative functions are appropriate within a given socio-cultural context, depending on factors such as topic, role of participants, setting and norms of interaction. By this means, they implied that any model of communicative competence should include the multifaceted knowledge of context.

"Discourse competence" as a pivotal sub-category of socio-cultural rules is representative of the ability to combine language structures into various types of cohesive texts (i.e., appropriate combination of communicative functions) of group of utterances. The focus of rules of discourse in this framework is on the ability to combine utterances with regard to communicative functions. Consequently, the locus of emphasis as Widowson (1978) implied is on text-based cohesion and coherence.

The inclusion of strategic competence in this model was a major step forward with respect to the previous frameworks proposed by Munby (1978) and Van eks' (1977) concept of functional and notional grammar. This component is made up of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be employed by the person to recompense for the flaws in communication because of the performance variables or lack of competence. These strategies include avoidance, circumlocution, paraphrase, repetition, avoidance of words, etc.

Subsequently, Cannale (1981) pointed out that "strategic competence" can also be applied to enhance the effectiveness of communication in a qualitative sense; it is different from the other three components of communicative competence in that it is not a type of stored knowledge and it includes non-cognitive aspects such as self-confidence, readiness to take risks, etc. However since it is highly interrelated to other components, it enables learners to deal effectively with the limitations in their competence. He also considered discourse competence as a separate competence from the sociolinguistic competence in order to highlight the importance of this competence as a separate component. For Cannale (1983) sociolinguistic competence is the appropriateness of meaning (whether functions, attitudes, ideas

are appropriate to the context) and of forms (how appropriate the realization of functions, attitudes and ideas are in specific contexts).

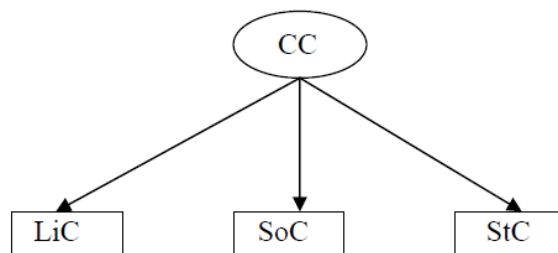


Figure 2: Canale and Swine's model of communicative competence (1980)

D. Farhady's Model of Communicative Competence

Farhady(1980, 2005), one of the first vocal critics of the notion of Canale and Swine model of communicative competence, contended that communicative competence is so vast in domain and complex in nature that it is not even possible for many native speakers to reach it. This argument was espoused years later by Widowson (1983) implying that not all people could be communicatively competent in all given language contexts. In this regard, Farhady introduced the notorious concept of "functional competence" (FC) in language assessment as a specific sub-component of the communicative competence which embodied all the characteristics of the communicative competence but was limited in terms of scope. Based on the functional model of testing, he designed functional tests in (1981) which proved to be more diagnostic and valid than integrative and discrete- point tests.

E. Bachmans' Model of Communicative Competence

One of the substantial advancements in the realm of language testing was Bachmans' (1990) comprehensive model of communicative competence which was an improvement over the previous models, from diverse perspectives. This model not only specified different components of communicative competence but also indicated how these components interact with each other in a complex manner. Another major achievement of Bachman's model over the previous ones was its emphasis on the central role of strategic competence including meta-cognitive strategies or higher order process that explain the interaction of knowledge and affective components of language use. According to Bachman (1990) and the subsequent model of Bachman & Palmer (1996) many traits of language users such as some general characteristics (ethnicity, cognitive style, sex, nationality, etc), their topical knowledge (knowledge of the world, background knowledge, affective schema (the feelings and biases people may have toward some linguistic contents) as well as the language ability impact the communicative language ability and linguistic performance of the learners in the real life context. For Bachman (1990) language ability is the most substantive characteristic of communicative competence which is composed of two broad categories including: organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.

He maintains that "organizational knowledge" associates to the production and comprehension of grammatical utterances. This type of knowledge is employed for the construction of either oral or conversational texts. There are two areas of organizational knowledge; grammatical knowledge used for producing grammatically acceptable utterances and organizational knowledge for organizing sentences to form both oral and written texts.

"Grammatical knowledge" contributes to the production or comprehension of the formally acceptable utterances or sentences. The lexical, syntactic, phonological and graphological knowledge are deemed as the subcomponents of this competence. "Textual knowledge" encompasses the knowledge required for generating and comprehending either spoken or written texts. There are two areas of textual knowledge: knowledge of "cohesion" and knowledge of "rhetorical" or conversational organization.

Knowledge of cohesion is adopted to generate the textual relationship among sentences (anaphora, ellipsis, conjunctions, substitution, etc) in written texts or among utterances in conversations. Knowledge of conversational organization is involved in producing or comprehending organizational development in written texts. It is the knowledge that indicates how (spoken or written) texts are structured so that they are recognized conventional by hearers or readers.

1. Pragmatic knowledge

In Bachmans' model, the inclusion of extra-linguistic knowledge was the focal point. Hence, he gave priority to the pragmatic aspects of language. This knowledge enables the user to adopt his linguistic knowledge to the context. This adaptation considers the social position of participants, the relationship between them, the setting parameters, dialects, registers and many other factors. In this model, there are two areas of pragmatic knowledge: functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge. Functional knowledge includes what he called illocutionary competence that enables the user to interpret relationships between utterances and texts and the intentions of language users.

To define the functional competence, Bachman refers to Haliday's (1973) classification of the language functions. For Haliday, Functional knowledge involves the knowledge of four categories of language functions: ideational, manipulative, instrumental and imaginative.

For instance, drawing upon the knowledge of manipulative function, it is possible to use language to affect the world around us which includes the knowledge of the following:

- a. Instrumental functions are exploited to get other people to do things for our sake.
- b. Regulatory functions: exploited to preside over what other people do.
- c. Interpersonal functions: used to establish, maintain and change interpersonal relationships.
- d. Knowledge of heuristic functions: enables us to use language to create an imaginative world.

2. Sociolinguistic knowledge

As another substantial component of pragmatic knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge is wedged to create or interpret language that is appropriate to a particular language use setting: it embodies 1) sensitivity to registers which is of overriding importance, because in any language as Stevens, Haliday, Macintosh and Stevens (1964) implied, there is a variety of registers in terms of the three aspects of language use which include, field and mode of discourse as well as the style of discourse which refer to the relations between participants. The knowledge of these variations in sociolinguistic competence are important 2) knowledge of cultural references and figures of speech, which means the knowledge of the extended meaning given by specific cultures to particular events, places, institutions. It also involves the knowledge of connotation of that meaning. 3) Sensitivity to naturalness that signals the native-like use of language. 4) Sensitivity to dialects, entailing the awareness from the regional and social varieties or dialects. Different contexts require the use of different languages.

3. Strategic competence

This competence is defined as consisting of a set of meta-cognitive strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive process providing a cognitive management function in language use. There are three general areas in which meta-cognitive component operate: 1) goal setting (deciding what one is going to do 2) Assessment (taking stock of what is needed and what one has to work with). 3) Planning- deciding how to use what one has.

One notable advance on the Canale and Swine model is that Bachman underpins that test design and scoring might have a significant impact on the test takers' performance as a direct outcome of strategic competence. Certain tasks are highly attributable to the use of strategic competence to compensate for the lack of competence in other areas. This model vividly distinguishes between what constitutes knowledge and what constitutes the skill which is left unclear in the aforementioned model. In the second place, it explicitly attempts to characterize the process by which the wide range of components interacts with each other and in the context in which language performance occurs.

F. Celcia Murcia's Model of Communicative Competence

Celcia Murcia, Thurrell & Dorney (1995) withheld that their model of competence has expanded the scope of the prior models of communicative competence in terms of content specification. This model included five components including "socio-cultural competence", "linguistic competence", and "discourse competence" along with "actional and strategic competence". Actional competence was an addition to Canale and Swine model which was conceptualized as a competence in conveying and understanding communicative intent by performing speech acts.

They put discourse competence at the focal position in which "lexico-grammatical", actional skills of communicative intent and socio-cultural and constitute discourse, which in turn, shapes each of the other three components. The two minor terminological differences between this new model and Canale and Swine model is in that they used the term linguistic competence rather than grammatical competence so as to explicitly indicate that this component comprises lexis and phonology, morphology and syntax. In the same line, they exploited the term socio-linguistic competence to better distinguish it from actional competence. Linguistic competence which plays a substantive role in this model includes the following components.



Figure 3: Model of Communicative competence by Celcia Murcia et al (1995)

a. Discourse competence

The discourse component of their suggested model is positioned at the center of the model, reuniting cohesion and coherence. It is in the discourse competence where the Lexico-grammatical building blocks, the actional skills and the socio-cultural context come together and shape discourse component. This component pertinent to the formal and contextual elements in the comprehension and production of language includes cohesion; Deixis, coherence, and conversational structure form this component. The sub-components of each of these categories are as following:

1. Suggested components of discourse competence

(1) Cohesion

- References (anaphora-cataphora)
- Substitution/ ellipsis
- Conjunctions
- Lexical chains

(2) Deixis

- Personal (pronoun)
- Spatial (here, there...)
- Temporal (now, then,)
- Textual coherence
- Organizational expression and interpretation of content and purpose.
- Thematisation and staging.
- Management of new and old information.
- Propositional structure and their organizational sequences.
- Temporal continuity/shift.

(3) Conversational structure

- Turn taking system in conversation and varieties of genre.
- How to perform opening and reopening.
- Topic establishment and change.
- How to hold and relinquish information.
- How to interact.
- How to collaborate and back channel.
- How to pre-closing and closing.
- Adjacency pairs.

2. Actional competence

The introduction of Actional competence was one of the major steps taken by Celcia-Murcia et al (1995) for enriching the content of communicative competence. It entails more components than the functional competence of Bachman (1990) model and widely draws on the Van Eks' (1977) taxonomy of linguistic functions. According to Future& Davidson (2007) actional competence is defined as a competence in conveying and understanding communicative intent that is matching actional intent with linguistic form. For many communicative purposes they maintain that this competence is of great importance. It includes the following components:

a. Suggested components of Actional competence

(1). Knowledge of language functions including:

- Interpersonal exchange
- Greeting and leave taking
- Making introductions
- Expressing and acknowledging gratitude
- Reacting to the interlocutors' speech by showing attention, interest, etc.

(2). Information sharing

- Asking for and giving information
- Reporting (describing and narrating)
- Remembering
- Explaining and discussing
- Opinions and feelings
- Expressing and finding out about opinions and attitudes
- Agreeing and disagreeing

(3). Problem solving

- Complaining
- Blaming and accusing
- Admitting and denying

3. Socio-cultural competence

Socio-cultural competence refers to the speakers' knowledge of how to express messages appropriately within the oral, social and cultural context of communication in accordance with the pragmatic factors related to variation in

language. Celcia-Murcia et al (1995) separated sociolinguistic competence including, the knowledge related to context that impacts upon what is said and how it is said. A Comprehensive list of the components of the socio-cultural competence is shown as the following:

Suggested components of socio-cultural competence

- a. Social contextual factors which include participants' variables such as age, gender, status, etc.
- b. Situational variables including the time and place of linguistic performance, and social situation and so forth
- c. Stylistic appropriateness factors including politeness conventions and strategies, degree of formality and field specific registers
- d. Cultural factor encompassing socio-cultural background knowledge, living condition (way of life, living standards,) awareness of major dialectal or regional differences and nonverbal communicative factors including 1) kinesics factors 2) proxemic and paralinguistic factors

G. Kramsch Model of Interactional Competence

For Kramsch (1986), having just a shared knowledge of the world does not guarantee successful interaction in the real life context. Verbal and non-verbal interaction in real life context entail the dynamic co-construction of utterances and meanings which are not mostly pre-specified and pre-planned. Consequently, successes in interaction as Fulture and Davidson (2007) implied involves the ability of the individuals to process and negotiate the intended meaning, predict listeners' response and possible misunderstanding. In the same line, it is crucial for the interlocutors to be able to clarify their own and others' intentions and finally to arrive at a communicative decision during their conversational interaction. According to Kramsch's (1986) definition, interaction is a dynamic process of matching between intended, perceived and expected meaning. As Fulture and Davidson (2007) implied, interactional competence subsumes the following parts of the model: the conversational structure component of discourse competence which includes sequential organization of that conversation, turn taking organization, and the ability to repair speech, in case of possible problems. The strategic competence is of no difference with that of the Canale and Swain (1980) model. This competence includes the avoidance and reduction strategies, achievement and compensation strategies along with self monitoring and interactional strategies.

III. CONCLUSION

This paper indicates that a substantial amount of time and energy of theorists has been devoted to the introduction of practical and sophisticated models of the nature of language ability as one of the most complicated issues in the field of language assessment. The expansion of the proposed model was heavily influenced by the mainstream structuralist, cognitive and functional and socio-cultural linguists. It also indicates that each of these models added more components to language proficiency while others have offered insightful suggestions about the multi-dimensional interactions between these components. However, up to now no comprehensive model has been suggested for evaluation purposes due to the multiplicity of the extra-linguistic factors that play role in producing the system of language. Maybe it is the time that we accept Macnamara's (2000) suggestion mentioned in this research and not to open the 'Pondera box' by which he meant to stop trying to demystify the distressingly complicated nature of language proficiency.

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