



Diverse Conceptualizations of “Competence” in Second Language Research and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the intellectual roots and developments of the notion of competence in second language (L2) teaching and research. Since L2 teaching and research invariably concern competence of some sort (linguistic, communicative, interactional, or otherwise), there have been countless attempts to define competence from diverse theoretical perspectives, resulting in a plethora of definitions as well as debates, confusions, and tensions. As global mobility and technological advancements prompt us to question traditional assumptions in our field, it is high time to take stock of how the notion of competence has been dealt with in L2 teaching and research. With a particular focus on interactional discourse, this short article offers a glimpse into the conceptual diversity regarding competence and facilitate further exploration of how it may be researched and fostered in view of modern-day complexities. The article concludes with a discussion of pedagogical implications and controversies.

Keywords: linguistic competence, communicative competence, interactional competence, emergentism,

Introduction

As second language (L2) researchers and educators, our work invariably revolves around an understanding of competence of some sort, be it linguistic, communicative, interactional, or otherwise. L2 researchers are invested in understanding how competence develops in controlled or naturalistic environments, while L2 educators are concerned with how to facilitate the development of competence in instructional settings such as the classroom. What is not so invariable, however, is the understanding of competence itself. Reflecting its central status in our field, there have been countless attempts to define competence from diverse theoretical perspectives, resulting in a plethora of definitions as well as debates, confusions, and tensions. More than 30 years ago, Taylor (1988) observed such a state of affairs, and the situation has only become more complex over the years. Earlier understandings of competence, as adopted in L2 research and education, originated from neighboring fields such as transformational generative linguistics (Chomsky, 1965), linguistic anthropology (Hymes, 1972), and ethnomethodological conversation analysis (CA; Mehan, 1980; Sacks, 1984). However, there have also been efforts to develop more specialized concepts such as L2 communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) and L2 interactional competence (Hall & Doehler, 2011). These developments correspond to evolving scholarly trends in L2 research moving towards an expansive, socially distributed understanding of competence. As global mobility and technological advancements prompt us to question traditional assumptions in our field, such as homogeneity of speech communities, boundedness of languages, and primacy of linguistic resources over non-linguistic ones, it is high time to take stock of how the notion of competence has been dealt with in L2 research and teaching. With a particular focus on interactional discourse, this short article aims to give a glimpse into the conceptual diversity regarding the notion of competence and facilitate further exploration of how competence can be researched and fostered in view of modern-day complexities.

Historical overview

Intellectual roots of competence

Originating from Noam Chomsky's (1965) work on transformational generative grammar, the notion of competence has long played a central role in language research. As Chomsky was concerned with the cognitive origin of language, rather than language use, learning, or teaching, his notion of *linguistic competence* may look foreign or even irrelevant to most L2 researchers

and educators today. In an oft-cited statement, Chomsky plainly delimited the scope of his theory as follows:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

(Chomsky, 1965, p. 3)

Clearly, Chomsky was not interested in what we would regard as *language*; rather he was interested in *idealized* linguistic knowledge of an *idealized* native speaker. His interest is reflected in the well-known distinction between competence and performance, wherein the latter is only regarded as indirect, less-than-ideal evidence of competence that is “fairly degenerate in quality” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 31).

In contrast, Dell Hymes’s *communicative competence* may seem more familiar to many L2 researchers and educators today. Taking the perspective of education, Hymes reacted to Chomsky’s statement:

From the perspective of the children we seek to understand and help, such a statement may seem almost a declaration of irrelevance. All the difficulties that confront the children and ourselves seem swept from view.

(Hymes, 1972, p. 270)

It is important to note that, rather than rejecting Chomsky’s work all together, what Hymes meant to propose was as an extension of transformational generative grammar to address “rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless” (p. 278), giving equal importance to linguistic knowledge and noncognitive factors (such as those named in Chomsky’s statement). Defined as “several systems of rules reflected in the judgements and abilities of those whose messages the behavior manifests” (ibid, p. 281), Hymes’ communicative competence encompasses the following four interrelated dimensions:

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;

3. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
4. Whether (and to what extent) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.

One distinctive and contested feature of communicative competence is that it is conceptualized as premised on both *knowledge* of rules and *ability* for use, unlike Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence which only addressed the former. This was crucial to Hymes, as he was concerned with accounting for disparities in educational achievements among children from different social and racial backgrounds. For Hymes, linguistic competence was too restrictive to this end. Despite this important distinction, however, linguistic competence and communicative competence share a cognitivist orientation in that they retain the distinction between competence and performance, with the former seen as generative of the latter.

On the contrary, CA scholars, among others who hold *emergentist* perspectives, eschew such a distinction. From a CA perspective, Mehan (1980) redressed the notion of competence, arguing that research must center on “socially assembled situations” rather than “individual persons” (p.133) because participants in interaction are not simply following predetermined rules (see also, Sacks et al., 1974). Through his study of *competent students*, Mehan illuminated the multifaceted nature of *interactional competence* enacted through heterogenous resources (e.g., linguistic constructions and nonverbal conducts) in negotiating activity boundaries and collaboratively building up coherent discourses. Interactional competence is radically different from the earlier conceptualizations by Chomsky and Hymes in that it regards competence as emergent and co-constructed, rather than as predetermined and self-contained.

Conceptual diversity of competence in L2 research

The term competence started to appear in L2 research and teaching around the 1980s, initially paralleling the three scholarly traditions discussed in the previous section (e.g., Canale & Swain, 1980; Ellis, 1990; Gregg, 1990; Tarone, 1990; Taylor, 1988; Widdowson, 1989). Of these earlier endeavors, Canale and Swain's work on *L2 communicative competence* is probably the most well-known today. Building largely on Hymes' work, Canale and Swain postulated that L2 communicative competence is constituted by three interrelated competencies: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. One particularly unique feature of their framework was the addition of strategic competence: “verbal and non-

verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to ‘compensate for breakdowns in communication’ due to performance variables or to insufficient competence” (p. 30, emphasis added). Also, adding to Hymes’ work, Canale and Swain incorporated the notions of grammatical cohesion and discourse coherence into sociolinguistic competence¹.

Alongside Canale and Swain’s work, there were numerous concurrent efforts to define L2 competence and performance in the 1980s. Some scholars problematized Hymesian communicative competence which included *ability for use* (e.g., Taylor, 1988). Others debated whether competence would vary across time within the framework of interlanguage development. Gregg (1990) rejected the variability argument in adherence to the Chomskyan orthodoxy. Ellis (1990) maintained that “a learner’s competence [...] is inevitably variable” because acquisition of a new form involves a stage of free variation where multiple forms are used for the same function (see also Tarone, 1990). From a more usage-based perspective, Widdowson reconceptualized competence as “a matter of adaptation” with rules seen as “not generative but regulative and subservient” (p. 135). In resonance with the CA perspective discussed earlier, Widdowson’s notion departed from other conceptualizations of competence in qualifying the centrality of predetermined rules and attaching greater importance to spontaneous adaptation.

Efforts towards understanding competence continued into the 1990s. A key characteristic of this period was the rise of interactionally oriented work that called for discourse analytic methods (e.g., Firth & Wagner, 1997; Hall, 1995; Young, 1999). Going beyond a focus on grammatical and/or sociocultural rules, many scholars directed attention to the dynamic emergence of competence as co-constructed in interaction. For example, in her study of L2 Spanish classroom interaction, Hall (1995) illuminated how participants developed topical coherence through trajectories of speech events, lexical choices, and participation structures, as well as prosodic and other linguistic means for signaling activity transitions. Hall’s work suggested that such a form of competence cannot be entirely predetermined by or reducible to individual knowledge because it depends on moment-by-moment negotiation among co-participants (see also Young, 1999). Taking the emergentist perspective even further, Firth and Wagner (1997) critiqued the then-dominant approaches to SLA and proposed a *holistic approach* to foreground the resourcefulness of learners as language users. Breaking with a focus on idealized and decontextualized norms, Firth and Wagner called for studies of “how language is used as it is being acquired through interaction, and used resourcefully, contingently, and contextually” (p. 296, emphasis in original). Their call marked an important departure from a preoccupation with established norms and linguistic boundaries, allowing researchers to

consider language use/learning in its own right. Firth and Wagner's argument was also distinct from Canale and Swain's (1980) strategic competence, as it regarded strategies as central rather than compensatory. With a multitude of implications for L2 research and teaching, Firth and Wagner's work heralded various subsequent developments in the field such as English as a lingua franca (ELF; Seidlhofer, 2001), translingualism (Canagarajah, 2018; Li Wei, 2018), and CA-for-SLA (Markee & Kaper, 2004).

Implications for teaching and research: Towards an understanding of locally-relevant forms of competence

As evident from the historical overview above, competence is an extremely multifaceted construct. While earlier research reflected a cognitivist orientation premised on the distinction between competence and performance (Chomsky, 1965; Hymes, 1972), more and more scholars are drawn to emergentist perspectives that focus on the moment-by-moment construction of intersubjective understandings, revealing *locally relevant forms of competence*. Alongside this growing scholarly trend, discourse analytic studies using methods such as CA (e.g., Hazel, 2017), interactional sociolinguistics (e.g., Kimura & Canagarajah, 2020), and ethnography of communication (e.g., Duff, 2002) have become more and more prominent in our field. These discourse analytic methods can be understood as *magnifying glasses* of different thickness that assist the analyst in examining various levels of details. While I do not have space to discuss individual studies in detail, key insights gleaned from discourse analytic research may be summarized as follows:

- Competence is not entirely determined by preestablished norms and rules;
- Competence manifests on both productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading) levels;
- Competence entails mutual coordination of actions among participants to advance unfolding interactional sequences, although cooperation is not always a given;
- Competence emerges reflexively from an interplay of heterogeneous factors including participants' repertoires, communicative dispositions, identities, goals, previous socializations, language ideologies, power relations, and physical setups;
- Competence is distributed across and mediated by various entities including human participants, objects, social networks, artifacts, and participation frameworks;

- Competence is not a universal construct but particular to specific types of interactional encounters, while interactional resources (linguistic, discursive, cultural, embodied, and otherwise) are transferable across encounters;
- Competence is not restricted by socially constructed boundaries between named languages, as language knowledge for multilinguals is a unitary construct (cf. *multi-competence*, Cook & Li, 2016; *translanguaging as a theory of language*, Li, 2018).

These insights are critical to how we carry out our work as L2 researchers and teachers. Reflecting recent calls for further promoting emergentist perspectives such as CA (Eskildsen, 2018), translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2018; Li Wei, 2018), and new materialism (Toohey, 2019), L2 teaching and research should give greater attention to how communication in real-world situations works through diverse semiotic resources beyond just language. Though practical concerns and economic interests may persuade teachers to adhere to more traditional methods, L2 learners must at least be made aware that memorizing grammatical and socio-pragmatic rules would not guarantee *communicative success* in today's world (cf. Taguchi & Roever, 2017, Ch. 9). This may be facilitated in the classroom by incorporating exhibits of real-life communication and discussing how real-life practices may defy conventional norms.

L2 teachers and researchers must work hand-in-hand in seeking closer alignment between research and pedagogy because research insights about fluid communication processes may not readily lend themselves to the development of teachable materials and activities. Indeed, tensions are often observed between research insights and teachers' and learners' real-life concerns including a desire to learn/teach socially respected forms of language. Moreover, research findings may at times be perceived to run counter to educational goals by teachers. As an educator, Cazden (1996) expressed her concern quite some time ago:

Human knowledge and ability does [*sic*] develop in collaborative interactions with others; and mature abilities of more than one person often combine in “co-constructions” to productive effect. But the currently popular term “distributed cognition” sometimes seems to suggest that we should stop altogether thinking of knowledge as located in the minds of individuals, and consider it located only between minds.

(Cazden, 1996, p. 9)

Though there is no simple solution to this problem, it is necessary that teachers and educators, as well as other stakeholders such as learners and policymakers, collaborate in addressing the conflicts between communicative effectiveness vs. symbolic value, holism vs. individualism, and dynamism vs. stability. Continued dialogue among parties concerned is key to developing creative solutions in educating today's language learners who regularly confront uncertainty, unpredictability, and diversity.

About the Author

Daisuke Kimura: An Associate Professor at Waseda University. Using Conversation Analysis as the primary methodological tool, he studies L2 and lingua franca interactions in diverse contexts and configurations. His research interests include English as a lingua franca, multilingualism, multimodality, academic discourse socialization, and study abroad. His recent works have appeared in *Modern Language Journal*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, and *Journal of Pragmatics*.

Endnotes

¹ This article is a condensed version of a chapter I authored for *The Routledge Handbook for Second Language Acquisition and Discourse*. For a fuller treatment of the topic (including a detailed discussion of research methodologies and sample studies), please refer to the volume.

² In a subsequent publication, Canale (1983) respecified L2 communicative competence by creating a new component *discourse competence* consisting of grammatical cohesion and discourse coherence, separating these from sociolinguistic competence.

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