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Models of Language Proficiency: a Reflection on the Construct of Language Ability

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Abstract

The nature of language proficiency has been the object of much theoretical discussion and empirical investigation for approximately 60 years. So far, different models of proficiency have been proposed to define language and language ability, either has approached it through a different prospective and meanwhile they have added more complications to the definition. This article is intended to accomplish a historical review of more remarkable models of language proficiency and some of their contributions in developing our understanding of what we, as language assessors, have to measure. Also, the writers try to discuss some of the complications and misunderstandings in these models.

Keywords: *Model, Framework, Language Proficiency, Construct Validity*

1. Introduction

Throughout the past decades, there has been much advancement in various areas in language assessment. A major improvement has occurred in the direction of developing a more precise definition of what is meant by language proficiency. In the literature of language testing and assessment, many theoretical models have been offered to account for the construct of language ability. According to Davidson & Fulcher (2007), constructs are selected from models which are situated at the top levels of documentation in test architecture. This implies that the recognition

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of models of language ability and their belief structure would help testers and test users to develop more precise language tests which are popular as Model-Driven Tests (ibid). Although either of introduced orientations and models has illuminated what is meant by language and language ability, it has added some complexity to the nature of language assessment by offering new concepts which require more clarified definitions by themselves. This article is intended to accomplish a historical review of more remarkable models of language proficiency and some of their contributions in developing our understanding of what we, as language assessors, have to measure. Also, the writers try to discuss some of the complications and misunderstandings in these models.

2. Lado's Model of Skill or Component Model

Probably, Lado's orientation (1961) was the earliest structured theoretical framework to explain the construct of language ability at the time. Language, as Lado defines, is a complex system of communication with various levels of complexity involving intricate selection and ordering of meanings, sounds, and larger units and arrangements (Lado 1961, p. 2). He believed that language is made up of components called phonemes (units of sounds), morphemes (units of meaning), phrases (groups of words), clauses (groups of phrases), and sentences (groups of clauses), (ibid: 7). His definition of language was directed toward American Structuralism which believed in isolated language components.

Impact of Lado's model on language testing was development of new tests of language proficiency measuring each of language components separately. His trend was later referred to as Discrete-Point (DP) approach. The major contribution of such a model was that language teachers and testers could match theoretical conceptualization of language ability with the realization of language tests in practice (Farhady 2005). Perhaps, he tried to materialize the abstract concept of language that could be used by language testers. Lado's orientation was questioned and then rejected by later works of Oller (1979) on the ground that separating language components and testing them at a time is far from the reality of language in practice.

3. Oller's Integrative Model

Oller (1979 and later 1983) proposed his theoretical framework of language proficiency as a psycholinguistic model. He maintained that language is an integrative phenomenon in practice and unitary in nature, (Farhady 1994). This model is also referred to as Unitary Competence Hypothesis (UCH). The popular cloze and dictation-type tests are considered manifestations of Oller's model.

The point in favor of Oller's model in contrast to Lado's conceptualization was its holistic nature of connecting or integrating language skills and components. Also, he referred to a new test of language proficiency as pragmatic tests which added real-life situation. As Oller believed all pragmatic tests are integrative but not the other way round (1972). Both Lado and Oller, however, paid a large amount of attention to linguistic and psychological aspects of language ability and ignored the communication component of language and its effect on language tests.

4. Canale and Swain's Communicative Competence Model

In Late 1970s, the field of language testing witnessed an innovative trend in defining language and language ability. Canale and Swain (1980) took the concept of communicative competence as their focal element in forming a framework for language ability. Although they presented communicative competence in terms of components, the nature of these new components was totally different from previous models. In their orientation, Canale and Swain focused on sociolinguistics and its interaction with other components of the model as grammatical and strategic competences. This new trend was a great improvement over the previous ones on the ground that it considered communication as a dynamic process which can be realized in language use.

Still, the problem was with the nature of language use which was defined as the demonstration of communicative knowledge in actual performance (Fulcher & Davidson 2007). Later on, Canale's refinement of the model determined two components for communicative competence: conscious and unconscious knowledge and the skills needed to use this knowledge in actual communication (ibid). This modification added one more competence to the model as discourse competence. Fulcher and Davidson do not find adding this new competence as a great change in the theory. Although Canale and Swain (1980, p. 34) support Oller's integrative tests as true measures of communicative competence, they suggest employing discrete-point tests as useful devices and even more effective in making learners aware of and in assessing the learners' control of separate components of communicative competence.

This model, as Farhady (2005) believes, seems additive in nature. In other words, he argues that communicative competence is so vast in domain and complex in nature that even native speakers may not achieve it (1983). This may imply that a language use at various conditions or contexts would manifest different levels of communicative competence, which in turn seems a threat to construct validity of language tests.

5. Farhady's Model of Functional Competence

Use of language for various purposes was core in functional competence. As Halliday (1976) describes, functions refer to what people do with language in different contexts; he considers four major or general functions (macro-functions) as there are different purposes for language use: ideational, manipulative, heuristic, and imaginative. According to Farhady (1983), communicative competence comprises many functional competencies within specific areas of language use and learners would accumulate more functional competences depending on their educational and professional careers. He does not consider a linear relation among functions and between functions and other components of communicative competence. Although his orientation seems an improvement over Canale and Swain's model, it only adds the significance of context determination to their model.

6. Bachman's Model of Language Competence

Bachman (1990) and then Bachman & Palmer (1996, 2010) introduced a more comprehensive model of language ability. A major achievement of this model over other previous ones seems to be its emphasis on the central role of strategic competence, metacognitive strategies or higher-order processes that explain the interaction of knowledge and affective components of language use (Fulcher & Davidson 2007). A major challenge could be the assessment of such strategies or

processes. It appears that language testing requires other devices than the ones available to the testers and teachers today to measure metacognitive levels employed by testees in communicative tests.

Bachman & Palmer's model of language competence (2010) is undoubtedly multidisciplinary and complex in nature. The introduction of affective factors, as Fulcher and Davidson (2007, p. 45) refer, is a major step in making the model quite complicated. This complexity increases when teachers are asked to use the model as a checklist to develop their own tests (Bachman & Palmer 1996). Considering components such as metacognitive strategies employed in attempting items as construct-irrelevant (or -relevant) variables and their assessment procedures seem to be major issues for language teachers.

7. Celce-Murcia's Model of Interaction among Components of Communicative Competence

Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell (1995) proposed a model which is an elaboration of the earlier communicative competence model (Canale, 1983). This model was proposed as a criticism to Bachman's model for limiting to the context of language testing (Fulcher & Davidson 2007). The major issue in this model appears to be its sensitivity to discourse competence. Celce-Murcia et al (1995) emphasize the dynamic aspect of the model and indicates that the different components in the model interact with each other. She adds:

It is not sufficient simply to list all the components.....; it is important to show the potential overlaps, interrelations and interactions, and to realize that discourse is where all the competencies most obviously reveal themselves. Discourse thus is the component in which (or through which) all the other competencies must be studied—and ultimately assessed—if one is concerned with communicative competence, which is not a hierarchical system of discrete competencies or abilities but a dynamic, interactive construct. (p. 145)

Celce-Murcia's model of communicative competence provides a comprehensive view of linguistic and cultural issues that may affect students' academic performance. The model suggests that some components can be employed more effectively in the classroom situations and according to the communicative needs of the specific learner group (Celce-Murcia et al 1995). This perspective implies that a language test should match itself to the setting for which it is designed. It also encourages more interaction between the context of language tests and the learners' communicative needs.

In this model, socio-cultural competence represents the speaker/listener's background knowledge of the target community (e.g., understanding communications, beliefs, values, conventions, and taboos of the target community), which makes informed comprehension and communication possible (Abedi & Gándara 2006). However, McNamara (2000, p. 69) argues that inclusion of such variances in a language test makes assessment a test of identity rather than of proficiency. It seems that even within cultural and ethnic groups or subcultures, there is some amount of misunderstanding on the value systems that would rarely affect language ability. The fact that social conventions and awareness of values are significant when one has close

interaction with the native community and culture would lead the language testers to develop different language tests for EFL or ESL contexts.

8. Kramsch's Model of Interactional Competence

Successful interaction as Kramsch (1986, p. 367) presupposes is not only a shared knowledge of the world, but also the construction of a shared internal context. She refers to this knowledge as interactional competence: an ability to process and negotiate the intended meaning, anticipate listener's response and possible misunderstanding, clarify one's own and others' intentions and finally arrive at a communicative decision. According to this definition, interaction is a dynamic process of matching between intended, perceived and anticipated meanings.

Fulcher & Davidson (2007, p. 49) find testing interactional competence challenging since it is a shared knowledge and cannot be assigned to a single individual. Their position implicitly targets the construct validity of such ability among testees. In their argument of the truthfulness of the score meaning in such tests, they consider it difficult to separate interlocutors' personal language ability and their dexterity in handling a conversation. Interactional competence model seems to be monolithic in nature, although it takes communication as a process of communicative exchange. Interactional competence model as Kramsch (1986, p. 370) describes, focuses on "notions or concepts", on "interactional processes and discourse skills". The challenge is what one can find in this model is similar to what he can see in Farhady's orientation of functional competence. Both models appear to look at the language locked in the situations not going beyond the contexts.

9. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, or CEFR, is a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe. The main aim of CEFR is to provide a method of assessing and teaching which applies to all languages in Europe. Today, CEFR along with its six reference levels are becoming widely accepted as the standard for grading an individual's language proficiency.

CEFR divides learners into three broad divisions which can be divided into six levels: A Basic User, A1 Breakthrough, A2 Way stage, B Independent User, B1 Threshold, B2 Vantage, C Proficient User, C1 Effective Operational Proficiency, and C2 Mastery. The European Union Council Resolution recommended using the CEFR to set up systems of validation of language ability (Council of Europe Website).

Fulcher (2004), however, believes that the CEFR is nothing more than a set of scaled descriptors that reflects what groups of teachers drawn from around Europe could agree represented "more" and "less" proficient. He specifies the danger is that the teachers are beginning to believe that the CEFR scales represent an acquisitional hierarchy. In other words, teacher may come to this false conceptualization that CEFR is the only reliable system and try to match their own teaching policies based on these scales. Therefore, as Davidson and Fulcher (2007) state, CEFR is just a series of guidelines that any framework may offer but we should not go beyond it to consider it as a model of language ability.

10. Conclusion

The domain of language testing has witnessed many shifts in the approaches towards language and language ability. Any of these orientations has tried to consider one or some aspects of language proficiency or what we do with language and elaborate on it. The interesting thing is that it seems an endless story if we just spend time on developing tests on models; it seems that we need to take other approaches which require no models in the first place to develop a test.

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