

Proficiency And Communicative Competence In L2: Implications For Teachers And Learners

By

J. A. Adegbile And O. F. Alabi

Institute of Education

University of Ibadan

Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

The concept of proficiency as far as language is concerned has remained a relative term in linguistic parlance. In absolute sense of it, proficiency represents an “unknowable abstraction that reflects the universal competence of native speakers”; a perception that has great consequences for the second language learners. This led to the emphasis placed on communicative competence and learner variability from the early 1970s. Learners vary in their linguistic competence. They are also prone to both interlingua and intralingua errors, with many having difficulty in expressing their communicative intentions. This paper is therefore one attempt aimed at providing insight into the learners’ structural and grammatical problems as well as communication strategies they employ in awareness of the gaps in their linguistic repertoire.

Introduction

The definition of proficiency as far as language is concerned has consequences for second language learners. For second language learners, attaining native – speaker proficiency is almost a state of utopia. According to Bialystok (1998) a proper definition of language proficiency should present an identifiable standard against which to describe language skills of users in different contexts. This requires a combination of formal structure, that is, a clear set of standards and communicative application, which include recognition of variation from the rules.

In actual sense, second language learners vary in the ultimate level of proficiency with many failing to achieve target language competence. The variability has been linked to the fact that learners are less familiar and confident with the structural elements and conventions of the target language. The variable performance is often characterized by both interlingual and intralingual errors that emerge as learners develop interlanguage development.

Moreover, as a result of the gaps in learners’ linguistic repertoire, they often have difficulty in expressing their communicative intentions. This, most of the times, makes them adopt some communication strategies in an attempt to pass across their meaning. This apparent structural and grammatical inadequacy in learners’ repertoire presents great challenges not only to the learners but also to teachers and researchers.

Proficiency And Communicative Competence In Language

The definition of language proficiency is deeply entangled in theoretical attitude (Bialystic, 1998). There are the formalist approach and the functionalist approach. The formalist sees language as code. Language proficiency is viewed as “ultimate unknowable abstraction that reflects the universal competence of native speakers” the functionalist explains language as “the outcome of social interaction in a linguistic environment,” thus; proficiency is explained in relationship to communication in specific context. The two perspectives are equally important. According to Myles (2004), the combination of formal

structure (a clear set of standards) and communicative application, which includes recognition of variations from the rules are essential to a proper definition of language proficiency. This will make the definition present identifiable standards against which to describe language skills of users in different contexts. Brown (2000) opines that a more complete conceptualization of language performance should therefore acknowledge personal characteristics, topical or real world knowledge, and affective schemata, among other factors related to social and cultural context.

Relating to cultural context, there is variability in the process of second language learning. Learners vary in the ultimate level of proficiency they achieve with many failing to reach target – language competence. The variation is often the result of individual learner's difference in motivation and aptitude, among others. In this wise, learner varieties should be acknowledged (Klein, 1998). It is more useful, then to think of proficiency as a process, in which learners alternate in their use of linguistic form according to the linguistic and situational context (Ellis, 1994). This lends credence to the functionalist perspective which emphasizes communicative competence and learner's variability.

The early perception of language proficiency viewed proficiency as little more than grammar and lexis. With the advent of communicative competence, however, the emphasis was no longer on grammatical aspects but also on ability to use language appropriately in different contexts and the ability to organize thoughts through language. Communicative competence was first proposed by Hymes (1970) and it represents attempt to develop students' sociolinguistic and discourse competence in addition to grammatical competence. It was borne out of the feelings that there is much more to linguistic competence than knowledge of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics.

Chomsky (1965) made a distinction between competence and performance. Jacquelyn (1990) views competence in the Chomskyan manner as a system (or systems) of constitutive rules that provide the speaker with criteria to decide what is grammatical, acceptable and appropriate, and what is not. He argues further that Chomsky's distinctions between competence and performance was valid not only for grammar but also for rules of language. The major constitutive components of competence therefore include (i) grammatical competence (ii) discourse competence, and, (iii) Sociolinguistic competence.

Grammatical competence involves computational aspect of language, the rules or formulations or constraints that allow us to pair sound with meaning, the rules that form syntactic constructions or phonological or semantic patterns of varied sorts (Jacquelyn, 1990). Discourse competence deals with the knowledge of the structure of text, both oral and written. It is the ability to use (produce and recognize) coherent and cohesive text, oral or written. Sociolinguistic competence has to do with the ability to produce, recognize socially appropriate language in context.

Variability In The Second Language Learners' Performance

Second language learners vary in their levels of competence with many failing to reach target – language competence. This inconsistency in learners' performance in L2 is not new to teachers. According to William (1984), this kind of variable performance is a normal phenomenon in second language learners. The varied performance has been linked to social as well as cognitive factors. Sociocognitive theory marries both social and cognitive factors together as they affect second language acquisition. According to sociocongnitive theorists, an exploration of social and cognitive factors provides some ideas on why learners differ in the rate of second language learning, in proficiency type (for instance, conversational ability versus writing) and in ultimate proficiency (Ellis, 1994).

One model designed to account for the role of social factors in language acquisition is Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model. The model interrelates four aspects of second language learning; the social and cultural milieu (which determines beliefs about language usage and culture), individual learner differences (this relates to motivation and language aptitude), the setting (formal and, or informal learning context) and learning outcomes. Myles (2004) believes that the following social factors can affect learner's level of communicative competence in second language:

- (i) negative attitude towards the target language;
- (ii) continued lack of progress in L2;
- (iii) wide social and psychological distance between the learners and target culture; and
- (iv) lack of integrative and instrumental motivation for learning.

Cognitive theorists believe that communicating, oral or written is an active process of skill development. They see acquisition as a product of complex interaction of the linguistic environment and the learner's internal mechanism. According to McLaughlin (1988), with practice, there is continual restructuring as learners shift the internal representations in order to achieve increased degree of mastery in second language.

Anderson's (1985) model of language production is a model that applies to both speaking and writing in a second language. The model is divided into three stages: Construction (in which the learner plans what he or she is going to write by brainstorming, using mind-map or outline) transformation (in which languages are applied to transform intended meaning into the form of the message when a writer is composing or revising) and; execution (which corresponds to the physical process of producing the text. Anderson's theory supports teaching approaches that considers the development of the learner (Snow, 2001).

Errors As Signs Of Imperfection In Learners' Repertoire And Their Implication For Learner

Second language learners have varying commands of the target language. Learners are still in the process of acquiring linguistic input that can guarantee native speaker's competence. As a result, varying degrees of error occur in learner's production. However, since language is acquired and not inherited, learners are not immune to errors. These errors, which represent the product of learning, also provide useful hints about the underlying process of learning. Many of the errors are "interlingual" (errors due to transferring rules from the mother tongue) while others are 'intralingual' (errors which show that learner's are processing the second language).

Varieties of error categories were proposed by Corder (1971). Corder categorized errors as pre-systematic, systematic and post-systematic. Pre-systematic errors are those made by a learner while he or she is trying to come to grips with a new point. Systematic errors are those errors which occur when the learner has formed an inaccurate hypothesis about the target language while post-systematic errors occur as a result of temporary forgetting of a point previously understood.

Generally, when a second language learner develops interlanguage, he or she commits errors. As in first language, some of the errors are lapses' or 'slips' of the tongue due to physical or psychological reasons. They are systematic. Some, on the other hand, occur regularly and show the misunderstanding of the second language system. The first kind of error was described by Chomsky as 'performance error' and the later as 'competence error'. Kern (2000) believes that whether the second language learner makes 'error, 'mistake'

or 'derailment', awkward discourse occurs because he is less familiar with structural elements and conventions of a new language (Target language). According to Myles (2004) some of the reasons for errors in learners' production are:

- (i) Learners make direct translation from L1 or they try out what they assume is legitimate structure of the target language although hindered by insufficient knowledge of correct usage.
- (ii) In the learning process, learners often experience native language interference from developmental stages of interlingua or from non – standard elements in spoken dialect.
- (iii) They often overgeneralise the rules for stylistic features when acquiring new discourse structure.
- (iv) Often, learners are not sure of what they want to express and this engenders erroneous production.
- (v) Learners, especially when it comes to writing in a second language may lack familiarity with new rhetorical structures and the organization of ideas.

It can be presumed that the following causes account for myriad of errors in second language learners' repertoire (Anasiudu, 1996).

- (i) Overgeneralisations: Certain errors are committed by learners because they have not mastered the rules of the target language or they apply the rules meant for some structures to all other structures. For example, in the case of past tense formation, a child who had learnt that past tense is formed by adding "ed" may overgeneralise the rule by producing such words as 'goed', 'speaked' 'weared', 'comed' .
- (ii) Ignorance of rule restriction: A rule may seem to have restrictions in a few cases. For a learner to attain reasonable competence in target language, he or she must master not only the rules but also their restrictions. For example, in forming plural of nouns, a rule calls for the addition of 's' to singular nouns. A student who is ignorant of the restriction to this rule may go ahead to produce such words as 'informations', 'furnitures', 'peoples' or such an expression as : 'We killed two mouses'.
- (iii) Incomplete application of rules: Some rules are normally applied in sequence. Errors do occur when such rules are not applied completely. For example, a learner may produce such a sentence as this: "Everybody behaved as he likes". The sentence contains two finite verbs and both need to be in the same tense.
- (iv) Formulation of false hypotheses: The tendency among L2 learners is to formulate hypotheses about the target language at each stage of their learning career. The hypotheses are progressively tested as more data emerged in their language experiences. Some of these hypotheses are proved false by further data. For example, learners may hypothesize that adverbs are formed with the derivational suffix – "ly". Such a learner can go ahead to produce expression as "yours brotherly."
- (v) Transfer of Learning: Problems may emerge as a result of the teaching strategy employed by the teacher. For example, at the primary sentence – building stage, a teacher may employ substitution tables in teaching the basic sentence types. If, for instance, a child is exposed to the use of first person singular and plural pronoun ("I" and "we") second person singular and plural ("You" and "you") and

third person plural ('they'), such a child, while trying to use third person singular pronouns 'he' or 'she' can form a sentence such as "He have a book".

- (vi) Error – induced model: Teachers serve as models for students to learn from. In some instances, when such models make mistakes wittingly or unwittingly, the learner imbibes the same mistake.

Communicative Strategies Of L2 Learners

Most of the times, second language learners encounter difficulty in expressing their communicative intentions. This is attributable to the gaps in their linguistic repertoire. A learner who is able to anticipate such difficulty may avoid communication or try to modify what he or she intends to say. Even when the learner is already engaged in communication (oral or written) and such difficulty is experienced, he or she may resort to an alternative way of getting the meaning across. These ways of coping with the communication situation is called 'communication strategy. According to William (1984) learners resort to the following communication strategies when they become aware of problems with which their current knowledge has difficulty in coping:

Avoiding Communication

Avoidance of communicative opportunities is always the way out when learners become aware of gaps or weakness in their repertoire. Occasions which will present difficulty are usually avoided. If it is oral, learners may refuse to talk and if it is writing situation, they may avoid writing on topics for which they know that they lack necessary vocabulary.

Adjusting the Message

In a situation where an exchange is already taking place, it may be too late to employ avoidance tactics. As a result, learners may decide to alter the meaning which they intend to communicate. They may omit some items of information, make the ideas simpler, less precise or saying something slightly different. In a writing situation, learners may decide to go off content, that is, writing something that is not relevant to the given topic.

Paraphrasing

Learners may resort to the use of paraphrase, circumlocution or description in order to express their intended meaning. For example, a learner who could not recall the word 'kettle' may say 'thing that we boil water in'

Approximating

Where a learner has problem with recalling the right diction, he or she may employ word or words which express the meaning as closely as possible to intended meaning. Such substitutions are often less specific than the meaning intended or out rightly inappropriate.

Creating New Words

Learners sometimes create new words which they hope will express the intended meaning. The new words may be literal translation from the elements in a native language.

For example, a learner may use the expression 'night meal' instead of 'supper' and 'shoe maker' instead of 'cobbler'.

Apart from learners' communication strategies mentioned earlier, learners may employ non-linguistic resources such as mime, gesture, or imitation. They can also switch to their native language or seek help from outside, invoking the co-operation of the listener either directly or indirectly by means of hesitation.

Implications And Conclusion

Evidently, many second language learners find it difficult to attain native speaker proficiency because they are still in the process of acquiring linguistic input in the target language, and they are less familiar and confident with the structural elements and conventions of a new language. These account for variability in their levels of communicative competence.

The variable performance, although considered normal, has been linked to a number of factors, including social and cognitive ones with attendant effect on learners' interlanguage development. Also, as learners develop interlanguage, they are susceptible to both interlingual and intralingual errors. The errors represent the product of learning and equally provide necessary insight into learners' cognitive process.

Moreover, many learners have problems in expressing their communicative intentions. This is as a result of the gaps in their linguistic repertoire. If learners are able to anticipate difficulty in communication or when they encounter one, they often resort to alternative ways of getting their meaning across. These alternative ways such as avoidance of communication, adjusting messages, paraphrasing, using approximation, creating new words, switching over to the native language, using non-linguistic resources or help-seeking measures are generally referred to as learners' communication strategy.

The knowledge of all the issues discussed so far and the insight provided should assist teachers. Rather than drawing conclusion about the intellectual ability of learners on the basis of structural and grammatical problems, they should accept and confront the challenges of assisting learners to attain greater proficiency because the greater the level of proficiency the better learners' speaking and writing quality.

REFERENCES

- Anasiudu, B.N. (1996). The technique of error analysis. *Effective English usage for tertiary education*. O.S. Ogwueleka, Y.A. Babatunde and Wale Osisanwo (Eds.) Lagos: Greenline Publishers. 132 – 141.
- Anderson, J. (1985). *Cognitive psychology and its implications*. New York: W.H. Freeman.
- Bialystok, E. (1998) Coming of age in applied linguistics. *Language Learning*. 48, 497 – 518.
- Brown, H.D. (2000). *Principles of Language learning and teaching* (4th ed.). White Plains, N.Y.: Longman.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects in the theory of syntax*. Massachusetts: Cambridge.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The Second Language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Gardner, R. (1985). *Social Psychology and Second language learning: The role of attitude and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Jacquelyn, S. (1990). Communicative competence revisited. *The development of Second language proficiency*. B. Harlay, Allen, P. Cumming, J. and Swain M. (Eds.). Cambridge University Press.
- Kern, R. (2000) *Literacy and Language*. Hong Kong. Oxford University Press.
- Klein, W. (1998). The Contribution of Second Language Acquisition researcher. *Language Learning*, 48, 527 – 549.
- McLaughlin (1985). *Theories of second language learning*. Baltimore: Edward Arnold.
- Myles, J. (2004) Second language writing and second language acquisition. *On Second Language Writing*. T. Silva and P. Matsuda. Eds. N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 191 – 200.
- Snow, M.A. (2001). Content – based and immersion model of second and foreign language teaching. *Teaching English as a Second or foreign Language*. M. Celce-Murcia ed. (3rd ed.). Boston: Heinle and Heinle. 303-318.
- William, L. (1984) *Foreign and Second Language Learning*. *Language acquisition research and its implications for the classroom*. 22 – 35.