

A REALISTIC ACHIEVEMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

If foreign language competence is a condition and quality of being well educated, capable and skilled in the use of a foreign language and in the appreciation of literature in it, it is a dynamic phenomenon. It has much to do with advancement towards and continuity in proficiency. There is one point in foreign language competence, though, which can be fixed. This is the threshold at which the mind comes to be so well equipped with foreign language matter that it starts operating of its own at the slightest verbal stimulus for the speaker to remember phrases, words, quotations, names and references seemingly without any effort. The process is very swift but is consciously perceivable as a status at which the mind had been provided with running texts. It is quite credible for the gifted and hard-working student to achieve this threshold at university, while its capacity has to be kept up in life-long education.

KEY WORDS

Competence, memory, the mental lexicon, the verbal unit(s), networks, context(s).

1. OUTLINING THE FIELD.

Taken in isolation, the term *competence* refers the informed and those familiar with the history of the linguistics of the twentieth century to American linguistics (Chomsky, 1972/1965). While limiting the context for his concept of the basic and the variable, the general and the particular, the underlying and the expressed in language, Noam Chomsky applied the term *competence* to mean the native speaker's intrinsic knowledge of a language, which is the speaker's tacit knowledge extracted in a description of the grammar of the language (Chomsky, 1972, 4, 140). He further specified this concept by associating it with the knowledge of a language that underlies performance and with that which identifies with grammaticalness in it (Chomsky, *Ibid.*, 4, 10, 11, 140). In other words, competence, to Noam Chomsky, was the organized and organizing generality in language which at least partly identifies with the grammatical structure of the language. This term, thus, was a technical concept quite limited in sense. Although one might credibly include the major aspects of lexical combinability within this concept irrespective of whether one reasons within the framework of empirical descriptive or transformational linguistics, to the contemporary linguist, competence has remained to mean the latent general knowledge of a language built in the native speaker's mind. The question of competence being determined by performance, although mentioned, was not developed by Noam Chomsky. It features strongly, though, in the concept of foreign language competence considered within the framework of functional linguistics. In this respect, the concept of foreign language competence in the present paper is closer to Del Hymes's notion of *communicative competence* (Hymes, 1971).

2. DEFINING THE CONCEPT AND STATING THE PROBLEM.

When one considers foreign language competence as an integral component of a university graduate profile, one ascribes wholly the meaning of communicative competence in the word *competence* here. But the two terms merge into one and there is little or no difference between the two terms (the Chomsky's *competence* and the Hymes's *communicative competence*) in functional linguistics. The theme of the present conference is a sufficient context to perceive the term *foreign language competence* as meaning skill and professional ability in one's use of a foreign language. This common notion of competence can and should be extended in the sphere of foreign language learning, the more so that psycholinguists appear "unwilling to make experimental distinctions between linguistic competence and general intellectual competence" of the speaker (Currie, 1973, 13). It will become obvious further in the present paper that foreign language competence does indeed involve intellectual competence and readiness. Whatever the overall observations, the present context invites a more precise definition of the term *foreign language competence*. It will not be an inaccuracy by far to say that foreign language competence refers to a condition and quality of being so well educated, capable and skilled in the use of a foreign language and in the appreciation of literature in it that one's ability approximates to near-native proficiency. Such knowledge of foreign languages has ideally been known and sought in Europe and it is obviously this level of knowledge that is presumed by the theme of the Conference. Foreign language competence in the sense just defined presents a problem in so far that the foreigner's proficiency in a foreign language is a challenging task, which has not been accurately described either prospectively or retrospectively. No case of foreign language competence has been recorded nor its result has been explicitly described. The data for the present paper has been drawn from an observation of the achievement of two persons – a male university undergraduate and a female academic..

3. A CASE STUDY.

Competence in a foreign language as described presupposes a number of skills. It means the ability to speak a foreign language fluently and idiomatically and write it grammatically so well that the dictionary is required basically to check the precise definitions and the stylistic acceptability of one's verbal choices. This skill presupposes thinking rather than mental translating in a foreign language, which is accessible by learning lexico-grammatical patterns and functional macro units in the foreign language. It further means a developed skill to understand the foreign language in all its varieties without an apriori preparation.

The skills of the competent user of a foreign language also include proficiency in reading. This means not only reading to extract the essential information as in newspaper reading and in reading works in specific fields for instruction. It also means the competent reading of literature which requires interpretation. Although one has to agree with William J. Entwistle that the word never means to the foreigner what it means to the native speaker¹, a competent user of a foreign language can read imaginative literature with maximum understanding, can credibly interpret its sense and warrant its interpretation with reference to the text, which is the essential and major task to any reader (Widdowson, 1992)².

¹ Cf.: "A stranger cannot judge the effect for a native except by learning from a native, and he is liable to give a wrong interpretation if he attempts one untaught. /.../ Statements on style, even by a native, are valid only when qualified by reference to some precise time" (Entwistle, 1953, 269).

² Henry G. Widdowson assumed that, in literary interpretation, the reader has to take an author's role upon himself and has to produce individual interpretations. However individual interpretations are likely to come from intelligent readers and are encouraged by the very nature of literature, they have nevertheless to be verified. This author set the condition of obligatory warrant to an individual interpretation. Cf.: "All poems, and indeed all forms of art, contain within their very design the potential for multiple significance". But the interpreters have

The ability to translate from a foreign language into the native language is a by-product to the competent user of the foreign language. Competence also means the foreign speaker's ability to translate from the native language into a foreign language, which is a major skill. This skill is achievable by focusing on patterning in the foreign language, by empirical generalizations and by resort to analogies in the foreign language. The skill in this kind of reverse translation requires permanent practice, while success in it testifies to a degree of proficiency in a foreign language .

The foreigner who is a competent user of a foreign language exposes, as a rule, familiarity with texts in the foreign language, excellent knowledge of its vocabulary and the ability in expert and instantaneous adjustment of its grammatical patterns and vocabulary. The building of the lexical memory corpus of the competent user of a foreign language can derive from extensive reading, from memorization of phrases and lexico-grammatical patterns as from active and unrestricted communication in the foreign language. This should not exclude translation practice. But it should be remembered that competence in a foreign language is a dynamic continuum and should be consciously attended to. One of the fundamental ways which enables the creating and upkeep of foreign language competence is the learning by heart of extensive texts. The committing to memory of poems or short fragments of prose is not the best organizing means which consolidates competence. Ideally, to get to the threshold level in the achievement of foreign language competence, one has virtually commit to memory at least one complete work. The work may be abridged but it has to be finished, which provides the basic building context of reference in the development of foreign language competence. The competence of the native speaker has a whole cultural context for the basic organizing reference. For the foreigner, it can be a play, and Shakespeare's plays have not yet dated for the purpose. (The use of drama in the teaching of English has been repeatedly confirmed rather than questioned. Cf.: McGregor, 1977; Walker, 1977; Maley, Duff, 1979; Bolton, 1980; Evans, 1984). This does not mean sitting and cramming scores of pages of a work in a foreign language. This rather means using the work extensively as in research work and memorizing whole stretches of it without exertion. Reading and re-reading happens to be a more effective way of learning than dire cramming.

The uses of memorising at least of an abridged major work are several. It provides the mind with a reference source in context. It also stretches the capacity of the mind to function by analogy. Being a literary work, such a text enables comparisons and simplifies the memorization of additional texts or their fragments. When the mind had been opened to language matter from different texts, the mind became activated so much that it started operating of its own as it were at the slightest verbal stimulus. The speaker managed to remember phrases, words, quotations, names and references seemingly without any effort. He could even process them as it were, compare in contextual associations and draw analogies. This was the threshold level in acquiring competence in a foreign language. It requires no proof to the interested that the threshold level in foreign language competence requires attendance and upkeep, the more so that further improvement of competence is possible and often desired.

What has been said presupposes a dedicated student in the process. The students in the case under consideration were well advanced in English studies. It takes a gifted and an unprejudiced student who is naturally open to the influx of language. But it also presupposes a diligent student who derives pleasure in learning. A gifted or a linguistically minded student is likely to succeed in this case. The actual persons on whose achievement the present consideration has been based were a university lecturer and a student in the programme of English as a foreign language and literature. –

“to provide them (i.e. their interpretations – MLD) with ways of justifying their own judgment by making as precise reference to the text as possible” (Widdowson, 1992, 24, xii).

At this stage of the development of foreign language competence for the speakers just mentioned, its resource begins acquiring shape. The definition of foreign language competence at the beginning emphasized the near-native proficiency in one's skill in foreign language usage and in the appreciation of literature in it. It is relevant to question at this point what ensures the near-native proficiency for the foreigner. The proficiency of the native speaker means his linguistic instinct and his ability to make decisions on his native language in reading and in writing in a number of spheres of communication. The decisions usually concern the meaning and sense of the native language and its appropriateness. Foreign language competence with its near-native proficiency presupposes approximation to the subconscious linguistic knowledge of the native speaker. As the authentic linguistic instinct of the native speaker with its subconscious linguistic knowledge cannot be acquired, one invariably wonders at what can be acquired in its stead. An approximate replacement of the linguistic instinct of the foreigner may derive from a considerable amount of the foreign language matter in one's mind as from one's ability to make comparisons and draw mental analogies with resort to one's memory corpus. This is a possible capacity of the foreign speaker's mind, especially if his memory functions with resort to texts rather than the dictionary information. The dictionary is required to a competent user of a foreign language, and it should be used often and skillfully, but no attempt should be made by the foreign speaker to become "a walking dictionary". The foreigner may gradually come to remember even definitions of frequent words, but his conscious efforts should not turn any further in this direction. The excellence of the language of dictionary definitions and examples naturally rub off on the foreigner's mind, which is welcome, especially if it happens semi-consciously. The living language matter in texts should be the resource from which the memory corpus of the competent foreign language speaker derives.

Gifts and dedication are really relevant conditions here. But the person in question would also require time for concrete tasks in the achievement of the threshold level in competence. This is the stage in learning when the mind of the person starts operating of its own as it were. It starts instantaneously providing phrases, words and quotations in and out of context(s), while producing and simultaneously editing his speech. This is the pointing the process of learning which marks the mean in achievement. Otherwise, the successful student happens to be engaged in a game with the flow of foreign language as it were. But this is a *condition sine qua non* in the achievement of foreign language competence. Competence in a foreign language cannot be achieved by the student who learns only the minimum and who performs only the formally prescribed tasks. To my knowledge, these conditions have been confirmed and satisfied for a young dedicated student and for an adult academic, for a man and for a woman. I have no statistical confirmation of any measure to confirm such an achievement. This is largely a result of success, and success is always individual.

As has been mentioned, good general education as well as intellectual development and readiness are also conducive to the achievement of foreign language competence. Thus it takes a dedicated and linguistically minded person to succeed. Since competence is a dynamic continuum, it finally means life-long education. Experience and introspection confirm the truthfulness of the achievement in competence and of its conditions as described. One can also draw on linguistic theory and research for the support of the above description.

4. THEORY IN SUPPORT OF THE LIMITED EXPERIENCE.

There is sufficient evidence in psycholinguistics and functional linguistics to support the credibility of the case study discussed above. One point which is relevant and can be explained is differences between man's mental lexicon and the book dictionary. One does not require much evidence to get convinced "that mental lexicon is arranged on a systematic basis" (Aitchison, 1990, 7). But the systems in the book dictionary and in man's mind differ.

First, the mental lexicon is not organized alphabetically or on the basis of sound-spelling system the way book dictionaries are organized (Aitchison, *Ibid.*, 10). Book dictionaries, moreover, contain a fixed number of words, only limited information about them and are inescapably outdated therefore. Second, the content of the mental lexicon is flexible rather than fixed. As they live with texts, humans not only add new words to their mental lexicon from time to time, but they create new words and new meanings from words which had been stored and which they encounter again while speech is in progress (Aitchison, *Ibid.*, 11). Third, “the biggest difference between a book dictionary and the mental lexicon is that the latter contains far, far more information about each entry” (Aitchison, *Ibid.*, 12). One can add that this information is open-ended as new contexts appear in which the words recur. For the same reason it amplifies together with the growth of man’s linguistic experience.

Fourth, words in book dictionaries are dealt with in isolation, while words in the mental lexicon preserve their interrelatedness with a range of words in most diverse spheres (Aitchison, *Ibid.*, 13). Fifth, book dictionaries “contain only a very small amount of data about the syntactic patterns into which each word can slot” (Aitchison, *Ibid.*, 13). The mental lexicon, on the contrary, stores words essentially in their syntactical patterns. At least every conscious foreign language learner can confirm that it is an easier and more economical way to memorise words in patterns rather than in isolation. Provided the syntactical patterns, the building of the mental lexicon is quicker and more reliable than otherwise. Sixth, “a book dictionary gives us a spuriously neat, static and incomplete view of the mental lexicon” (Aitchison, *Ibid.*, 14), which actually is richer, contextually alive and ample and stored in an infinite number of relations provided by the contexts of living speech. It is obvious that the mental lexicon stores words and reflects living speech in a multitude of relations for concrete words and for groups of words. This partly ensures the speed of the retrieval of the words from the mental lexicon.

As experimental research indicates, words stored in one’s memory carry about themselves most varied links with other words and patterns. They may be seen as linked “in a gigantic multidimensional cobweb” (Aitchison, *Ibid.*, 72). This concept of a cob web has an analogy with the concept of networks in linguistic theory (cf.: Halliday, 1978). It means that, while stored in the mental lexicon, words carry about themselves their links with semantic fields and semantic coordinates, with grammatical fields and groups, such as morphological word classes, collocations and synonyms. Coordinates and collocational links are especially strong in man’s memory. In other words, words are stored in the mental lexicon in all the variety of links that living speech provides (Aitchison, *Ibid.*, 74-83). The web-like links among the words in man’s mental lexicon are exploited in word retrieval, reasoning and in patterning in live speech. That is to say, provided the multitude of links in the mental lexicon, man can retain the links in his own speech as they are stored and man can also “make other, temporary links as they are needed” (Aitchison, *Ibid.*, 85).

Accepting this explanation of links and cross links in the mental lexicon as credible, one can see the proximity between relations relevant to the mental lexicon and those contained in the verbal units (lexical-grammatical units, clauses, sentences, and texts) which had been chosen to memorise in acquiring foreign language competence. The emphasis on macro units in learning for the purpose of acquiring competence has derived from experience³. When the experience is so much in line with theoretical and research data about the mental lexicon, one can see the cause of success in acquiring foreign language competence through memory work.

³ The phrase rather than the word has traditionally been chosen as a unit in learning English as a foreign language in the Department of English Philology, University of Vilnius. This has been a practice of long years and of several generations of teachers. The practice is in line with the requirements set to learning the vocabulary in English. The recommended condition has been to learn the vocabulary in contexts and this requirement has remained in use for years (cf.: Dolch, 1927; O’Neill, 1973; Gairns & Rodman, 1991)

One can further be convinced that the method and resources in learning as described have been correctly chosen and that the practice may be assessed as prospective.

A similar confirmation of the prospective uses of learning a foreign language in macro units and in shorter or longer texts will derive from functional linguistics which sees language as meaning potential realised in lexical-grammatical units integrated in networks of social structure and culture (Halliday, 1978). When the system of language is determined by the functions it has developed to serve, the determination of language units by its functions turned into major semantic categories (ideation, interpersonality and textuality) is only too obvious. What has to be explained is the integrity of different verbal units, of which the vocabulary is usually treated as basic in semantics, while the syntactical units are found formal. This view has no place in functional linguistics. In this linguistic theory, syntactical units are treated as major options from the language system, while the lexicon, which may be seen as “the most delicate grammar” is available to analogous options (Halliday, 1978, 43). Thus, functions of language treated as major units integrate lexical-grammatical units as concrete units of meaning, on the one hand, and themselves happen to be integrated into socio-semiotic networks which represent society and culture. The interrelatedness between verbal units, major semantic components in the system of language and socio-semiotic networks seems to be beyond question. The greater the appropriateness of verbal units to the socio-semiotic networks, the greater the probability that language internalized into the mental lexicon in its macro lexical-grammatical units will approximate the foreigner’s mental lexicon to that of the native speaker. For the same reason, the probability that the foreigner can acquire competence in the language which is not native to him appears to be greater.

A similar conclusion can be drawn if one focuses on conditions of understanding in natural human language. It has been Michael A.K.Halliday again who explained the role of context in the understanding of human speech (Halliday, 1978, 37 et passim; Halliday, Hasan, 1992). This author assumes that context enables man to predict meaning in speech and follow it guided by its sense. Out of the three contexts described in detail by Halliday and Hasan (the cultural context, the context of situation and the co-text or the immediate linguistic context), the context of the third kind is always present when the student is learning language in chunks, irrespective whether these are its lexical-grammatical units – phrases, clauses and sentences – or texts or their fragments. The role of context highlighted in functional linguistics in an understanding and use of language being beyond doubt, the method of learning to acquire foreign language competence described above gains credibility not only by its results, however limited so far, but also by reference to the theory.

5. CONCLUSIONS.

The experience which has been presented above as a case study should be treated as realistic rather than exceptional and ideal. What succeeded once, may succeed again for other persons seeking foreign language competence. Its usefulness lies in the applicability of text to it. One of the sensitive points that may be subjected to test, whether introspective or exterior, is the threshold level of acquiring foreign language competence. This is the point at which the mind becomes sufficiently charged with foreign language matter to start operating of its own as it were and provide the speaker with quotes and references from its own resources to be applied or to be checked. The operation of the mind on this level of knowledge is basically created by the power of context(s).

The confirmation of the correctness and productivity of the method in acquiring foreign language competence derived from different linguistic conceptions indicates no obstacles to the success. On the contrary, as has been shown, there is much positive in the practice according to the theories referred to. One condition which merits emphasis and which has only been mentioned is active participation in aural and written communication in the

language of learning. This would be learning a foreign language in the authentic context. The authentic means of learning accessible to any student would be radio, television, correspondence, oral encounters and reading. Their uses become especially obvious when the learner starts functioning in the authentic sociocultural context having learnt the foreign language to the intermediate level at least in whatever context. But he should have learnt it in an organized and disciplined way rather than traveled and picked randomly street and shop kind of language. This is economical and productive, however friendly the globalised world may be. Language is a major asset of culture and a major mystery. A well educated person who aspires to acquiring foreign language competence should rather acknowledge the difficulties and give due respect to the culture than dissipate himself. An achievement in foreign language competence is worth the effort.

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