WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW A LANGUAGE?: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR 2L TEACHING

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"What does it mean to know a language?" is a question asked by most Filipino classroom teachers and researchers the answers of which have not completely satisfied them. This paper will attempt to answer that question with the hope that it can pave the way for improving our second-language (2L) teaching activites in the classroom. Second-language learners, like the Filipino children, are oftentimes bombarded with much grammar lessons in their language classes because language teachers do think that is how they ought to know a language. For to know a language by all practicality is to learn and master the grammatical rules of that language. But isn't it enough to know, and for that matter, learn a language through merely mastering the rules of grammar? Language acquisition studies (Clark, 1972; Krashen, 1981; and Richards,1985) have presented evidences that it is not fully so. Indeed, said studies have claimed that there are essential factors involved in knowing or learning a language and these are as follows: linguistic competence, communicative competence, and language proficiency.
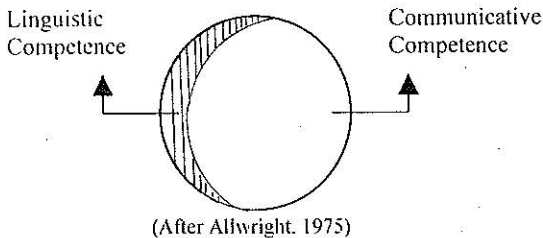
Linguistic Competence

Chomsky's writings in the 1950's and 1960's seem to equate knowing a language with knowing the grammatical rules of that language. Thus, linguistic competence refers to a learner's ability to use a language based on his mastery of the grammatical rules. Richards (1985:144) says that linguistic competence suggests one's knowledge "underlying our ability to produce and understand sentences in a language... and to express and meanings in ways that are native-like in the target language". In classroom situations, lessons and exercises on transformations and deletions that lead our second-language learners to form sentences via learning the rules of construction for words, phrases, and clauses as well as learning the choice of grammatical units such as

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subject, predicate, objective and subjective complements, and grammatical processes such as ellipsis, reordering and pronominalization are concrete examples of knowing and learning a language being equated with having gained a grammatical competence of that particular language. For instance, the non-Tagalog students in the southern part of the country have acquired the grammatical rules of Tagalog, their second language, through the imposition of Balarila lessons. But they have not fully learned Tagalog because they have yet to learn the speaking or conversational rules of the language. This idea brings us to a discussion on communicative competence.

Communicative Competence

The classic example of defining communicative competence is that of Dell Hymes (1972). Hymes has used the term communicative competence to refer to knowledge of the language user both of the rules of the grammar, vocabulary and semantics and rules of speaking, that is, the patterns of sociolinguistic behavior of a particular speech community. It is thus clear that knowing a language is not only learning the rules of grammar but also learning the rules of interlocutions and interactions. A good language learner knows how to carry on a conversation with an acceptable level of fluency and comprehensibility using appropriate speaking rules of the target speech community. Among the Visayans, English and Tagalog are their second or target languages. Moreover, a second-language speaker is judged to be communicatively competent if he knows "when it is appropriate to open a conversation and how, what topics are appropriate to particular speech events, which forms of addresses are to be used, to whom and in which situation, and how speech acts such as greetings, compliments, apologies, invitations and complements are to be given, interpreted and responded to" (Wolfson, 1983:61). By implications, language teachers should not only devise lessons that promote mastery of grammatical rules but also mastery of conversational or interaction rules in the teaching of a second language. Acquiring linguistic competence is exactly the first step to do before one purports to achieve communicative competence. In a broad circle of schematic presentation, linguistic competence is just a part of the arena of communicative competence. Allwright (1975) supports this contention in his conceptual diagram of the acquired linguistic competence of the individual as a part of his supposedly acquired territorial limits of communicative competence, as follows:

Linguistic Competence — Communicative Competence

(After Allwright. 1975)

The preceding diagram shows that the darken space is the acquired linguistic competence, while the rest of the space in that circle is the learner's acquired communicative competence.

Some doubts, however, surface regarding the idea of knowing a language as both knowing the rules of grammar and rules of speaking when we also begin to entertain the notion of knowing the level of proficiency for those second language learners who have acquired an acceptable level of mastery of grammatical rules (linguistic competence) and an acceptable level of mastering the speaking rules of the speech community (communicative competence). It is not therefore sufficient to conclude that one already knows a language because he has acquired both linguistic and communicative competence to use that language. There is still one important factor to contend with in order to validly conclude that one really knows or learns a language. And this has to do with the level of language proficiency among target language users.

Language Proficiency

Richards (1985) defines language proficiency as the degree of skill which a second language or foreign language is used in carrying out different communicative tasks in the target language. J.L. Clark (1972:5), on the other hand, claims that it is the learner's ability to use language for real-life purposes without regard to that manner in which that competence was acquired. Therefore, in testing the language proficiency of a second language learner, according to Clark, the frame of reference shifts from the classroom to the actual situation in which the language is used. It therefore suggests that a learner knows a language simply because he has already learned to use that language meaningfully and appropriately for real-life communicative interactions and purposes.

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Moreover, the notion of language proficiency, according to Richards (1985:146), differs from the notion of linguistic and communicative competence in some important ways, as follows:

1. It is not with reference to knowledge or competence, but with reference to performance, that is, to how language is used;

2. It refers to specific situations, purposes, tasks, and communicative activities, such as using conversation for face-to-face social interaction, listening to a lecture, or reading a college textbook;

3. It concerns with a level of skill at carrying out task, that is, to the notion of effectiveness. Thus, it has associated with it the concept of a criterion that can be used to evaluate the degree of skill with which a task is performed; and

4. It refers to the ability to call upon a variety of component subskills in order to perform different kinds of tasks at different levels of effectiveness.

It must be noted that grammatical competence and communicative competence that a learner has acquired are contributory factors of attaining language proficiency. Results of language tests conducted by language teachers and language institutes have provided us insights in this area. Comprehensive attempts were made in the earlier years to measure the 2L learner's proficiency. For instance, the Foreign Language Service Institute of USA devised an oral language proficient scale which measures the three levels of language proficiency that a given learner ought to achieve, namely: functions, contents, and accuracy. On language functions, a learner must have displayed an oral functional ability to use grammatical structures of the target language. On contents, a learner must be able to expound the topics presented to him as well as to understand or identify the meaning of a given set of vocabulary items. On accuracy, a learner must have displayed competence both in grammar and pronunciation. The same language institute devised a proficiency test that measures the speaking proficiency of a language learner in the following areas: accent, comprehension, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary. It was found out that these components or skills being tested vary according to the learners' acquired level of proficiency. For example, the grammar and vocabulary results could be high to some learners, while they could be low to other learners. From the overall results of the test, it was concluded that having gained a linguistic or

grammatical competence of a language does not suggest that one has a high level of language proficiency. Richards (1985:140) has this to say: "It is not simply a case of more grammar = more proficient; grammar skills interact with other language skills and together determine what learners can do it at any given level of proficiency and how well they can do it".

Moreover, attaining language proficiency has implications for the techniques and procedures of learning a second language. The learners' personal characteristics and their style of acquiring a second language have influences on their way up to becoming proficient in the target language. And this area on language acquisition process would entail more detailed explanation which can not be covered in this paper.

From the aforementioned discussion, it can be assumed that a given learner can be judged to have known and learned a language when he becomes linguistically and communicatively competent of the target language and has acquired an acceptable level of proficiency of that language.

Implications

To know or learn a language therefore means acquiring both linguistic and communicative competence and achieving proficiency in the four domains of language interactions of the target language, namely: reading, writing , listening and speaking. This finding has brought forward relevant implications for 2L teaching in the country.

Firstly, language teachers should not only be contented with the results of producing learners who are linguistically competent but also endeavor to make them communicatively competent in the target language. Having this in mind, it therefore behooves upon them to continuously update their knowledge on teaching methodologies, improve their classroom techniques and approaches; and in the process, review and realign their language teaching activities for better and effective classroom outputs. Concomitantly, this suggests that the 2L learners should be exposed to actual language-in-use activities or oral encounters with the native speakers of the target language. With this opportunity, the learners should also be able to pick up some everyday idiomatic expressions and phases which are not taken up in classroom context.

Secondly, there is a need to expose language learners to an adequate number of lessons and exercises on "conversational gambits". The term coined

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by Keller (1981) signals directions and relations within discourse. Doing some exercises and drills on conversational gambits may help learners develop and achieve a considerable degree of fluency in conversation. In fact, this is one good strategy of developing conversational competence. Thus, oral activity lessons must be appropriate and carefully designed for the purpose of effecting and developing communicative competence among 2L learners.

Thirdly, language teachers should have adequate knowledge on the theories and principles of language testing. Developing and constructing language tests is no easy task. The skill that one has gained in language testing should be constantly whetted to be able to produce a valid and reliable instrument for testing the learners' language proficiency. Evaluating the proficiency of language learners is a tedious process in that it entails looking into the totality of all language skills, that they have acquired, namely: phonological, morphological and syntactical.

Finally, the state of the art should again be reviewed and examined. Oftentimes, we hear that a greater majority of our college graduates today can hardly write and speak acceptable discourse in the target language, either English or Filipino. Is there something wrong in the way we teach second languages in the classroom? Or could it be the misinterpretation on the implementation of the country's Bilingual Policy of 1974? If the state of the art tells us that we need to redesign the second-language teaching program in the country, then let us do it for the benefit of our language learners.

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