

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between phonetic and intercultural communication competence and the part of English language teaching in students' intercultural communication competence. The article examines how to make the intercultural communication competence of English language learners in English language teaching, as well as understanding the important goals of English language teaching.

Key words: English language, English language teaching, linguistic competence, intercultural communication competence.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Language proficiency can be defined as the ability to use language accurately and appropriately in its oral and written forms in a variety of settings (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). Kern (2000) developed a broad conceptual framework for understanding language proficiency that includes three dimensions of academic literacy: linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural. To be proficient in a language requires knowledge and skills using the linguistic components. It also requires background knowledge, critical thinking and metacognitive skills, as well as understanding and applying cultural nuances, beliefs, and practices in context. Finally, being proficient in a language requires skill in using appropriately the four language domains—listening,

speaking, reading, and writing—for a variety of purposes, in a variety of situations, with a variety of audiences.

Language Domains

There are four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Although these four domains are interrelated, they can develop at different rates and independently of one another. These four domains can be classified as receptive or productive skills and as oral or written.

	Receptive	Productive
Oral	Listening	Speaking
Written	Reading	Writing

Language domains.

Receptive language refers to the information someone receives through listening or reading activities.

Listening. English learners process, understand, and respond to spoken language from a variety of speakers for a range of purposes in a variety of situations. Listening, however, is not a passive skill; it requires the active pursuit of meaning.

Reading. English learners process, interpret, and evaluate written words, symbols, and other visual cues used in texts to convey meaning. Learning to read in a second language may be hindered or enhanced by students levels of literacy in their native languages. Students who have strong reading foundations in their first languages bring with them literacy skills that can typically be transferred to the process of learning to read in English.

Productive language refers to the information produced to convey meaning. The very nature of productive language implies an audience, although not always an immediate audience, as in the case of writing a book or an e-mail.

Speaking. English learners engage in oral communication in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes and audiences in a wide array of social, cultural, and academic contexts. Contextual roles for getting and keeping the floor, turn taking, and the way in which children converse with adults are only a few examples.

Writing. English learners engage in written communication in a variety of forms for a variety of purposes and audiences. These forms include expressing meaning through drawing, symbols, and/or text. ELLs may come with writing styles and usages that are influenced by their home cultures.

Understanding the different demands of each language domain aids educators in addressing the language learning needs of their ELLs. Note that proficiency in a language may vary across the four basic language skills. For example, think about the times we have heard an adult language learner say, “I can read German, but I can’t speak it at all.” Likewise, some ELLs may have stronger listening and speaking skills, while others might be stronger writers but not as strong when it comes to speaking. When assessing the proficiency levels of ELLs, it is important to take into account an individual student’s performances in each domain.

English Language Proficiency Levels

Students progress through the stages of language proficiency at different rates: some acquire nativelike competency in 7 years, some may take 10 years, while others may never reach that level. Most students learning a second language follow a similar route; that is, certain linguistic forms and rules are acquired early, whereas others tend to be acquired late, as illustrated in Figure 2.3. In other words, while most students follow the same path in learning English, their pace and rate are different depending on a variety of factors, such as native language, familiarity with the Latin alphabet,

competence in the native language, age, previous schooling experiences, aptitude, motivation, personality, and other social and psychological factors.

Acquisition of English features

While many states have developed their own sets of standards and may use four, five, or six proficiency levels or apply different labels for each stage (e.g., beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced, and advanced), the standards outline the progression of English language development in the four domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing through each of the different levels from novice to proficient.

Elements of Communicative Competence

Communicative competence does not apply only to oral language. Communicative competence means competence in all four language domains—both the productive and the receptive. When talking of communicative competence, we need to consider four important elements: grammatical or linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and and strategic. Each will be defined below.

Grammatical or linguistic competencies involve accuracy of language used (e.g., spelling, vocabulary, sentence formation, pronunciation).

Sociolinguistic competencies entail the use of language in an appropriate manner or style in a given context. These competencies take into account a variety of factors such as rules and social conventions, the status of participants, and cultural norms.

Discourse competencies involve the ability to connect correctly formed phrases and sentences into a coherent and cohesive message in a particular style. These competencies involve the ability to be a sender and receiver of messages and to appropriately alternate those roles in conversations or written language.

Strategic competencies involve the development of strategies such as how to get into or out of conversation, break silences, hold the floor in conversations, and deal

with strategies to continue communicating when faced with breakdown in communication.

THE ROLE OF NATIVE LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

Native language is the primary or first language spoken by an individual. It is also called the mother tongue. The abbreviation L1 refers to someones native language. It is generally used in contrast to L2, the language a person is learning. Native culture is the term often used to refer to the culture acquired first in life by a person or the culture that this individual identifies with as a group member.

Norton (1997) claims that, “[t]he central questions teachers need to ask are not, What is the learners mother tongue? and Is the learner a native speaker of Punjabi? Rather the teacher should ask, What is the learners linguistic repertoire? Is the learners relationship to these languages based on expertise, inheritance, affiliation, or a combination?” (p. 418). There is an intimate relationship among language, culture, identity, and cognition. Educating ELLs includes not only focusing on language learning but also on building on students native languages, cultures, and experiences. Most English language learners are very familiar with at least one other language and have an intuitive understanding of how language and texts work. This knowledge of their first language (L1) will greatly enhance their opportunities to learn English. Research in this area indicates that full proficiency in the native language facilitates the development of the second language (L2) (August & Shanahan, 2017). Native language proficiency can also impact how students learn complex material, such as what is typically encountered in content-area classrooms (Ernst-Slavit & Slavit, 2007).

The key is to consider students first languages and cultures as resources to be tapped into and built upon. Thinking of our English learners as “having to start from scratch” is the equivalent of denying the many experiences that children have accumulated before coming to the United States and the vast amount of family and cultural knowledge and traditions that have been passed on to students from the

moment they were born. The consequences of denying students first language can be far reaching because language, culture, and identity are inextricably linked.

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