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Language proficiency: from description to prescription and back?

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Abstract: Language proficiency, when expressed as a grade or a mark, is often associated with the notions of measurement accuracy, reliability and trustworthiness. In this article my focus is on English as an additional/second language proficiency in the past fifty years or so. I will suggest that the notion of proficiency is an artefact influenced by the ebbs and flows of intellectual movements and conceptual recontextualizations. The onset of the concept of communicative competence in the 1970s serves as the point of departure for this discussion. I will explore the ways in which this primarily research-oriented concept has been filtered through a particular set of disciplinary and ideological perspectives that led to a pared-down view of language communication and a universalist approach to curriculum development and assessment of proficiency. After that I will turn to the recent research findings and theorizations in fields such as academic literacies, English as a Lingua Franca, flexible multilingualism and translanguaging to show the need for a more empirically situated, dynamic and fluid approach to language use and language proficiency. Further exploratory work is needed at this watershed moment. I will illustrate some of the challenges by analysing some of the conceptual and technical difficulties found in an international language curriculum and assessment framework as it attempts to embody a more dynamic and situated approach. In the final part of the discussion I will suggest a set of basic questions for further reflexive analysis and research.

Keywords: changes in language modelling; English as an additional/second language; English language teaching; language assessment; language proficiency

1 Introduction

The notion of proficiency pervades the fundamental tenets and everyday practice of language teaching. Whether we are talking about teaching English to adult

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migrants, a foreign language such as French in school and college, and a language such as Chinese or Spanish for business and professional purposes, proficiency is at the core of curriculum design, syllabus specifications, teaching materials and teaching-learning activities in the classroom. In this discussion I will examine the shifting conceptualizations of language proficiency with reference to the teaching of English as an additional/second/foreign language over the past fifty years or so. I will focus on two significant research-based conceptual developments that have triggered changes.

Professionally the teaching of English in different educational environments has led to different curricular emphases and pedagogic practices. Labels such as English as a foreign language (e.g. EFL in Japan) and English as an additional language (EAL in school education in England) signal the diversity in language teaching in terms of educational aims, teaching contexts and learner needs in different places in the world. That said, the notion of language proficiency underpins the diverse curriculum designs and teaching approaches in English language teaching as a professional field. For instance, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), widely recognized as a powerful international proficiency benchmarking framework for language teaching and assessment, is used as a reference for international EFL textbook materials for adult learners, for the foreign languages curriculum for schools in New Zealand, and for English as an additional/second language for linguistic minorities in the school system in Northern Ireland. In passing it should be noted that ‘English language proficiency’ tends to be used only with the teaching and learning of English where the learners already speak another language/s; it is rarely invoked in discussions about English as a school subject (‘I teach English’, not ‘I teach English language’), which generally assumes English to be students’ first language. The term ‘language proficiency’ seems to connote linguistic additionality in terms of ability or skill in educational and professional usage. Terminologically I will use ‘additional language’ in this discussion as it can be seen as a super-ordinate term to cover both ‘second’ and ‘foreign’ language contexts. The primary focus of this discussion is on the shifting conceptual bases of language proficiency that have impacted on curriculum frameworks and teaching approaches across different educational environments and teaching contexts. I will eschew the repetitive use of the adjective ‘additional/second’ in nominal phrases ‘language learning’, ‘language proficiency’, and ‘language use’ where the discursive prosody signals the propositional and rhetorical meaning clearly.

The notion of proficiency is built on a form of entelechy. Proficiency itself does not have an independent existence outside an educational or training scheme or an assessment framework. It is primarily an artefact created by

authorized actors to represent some form of evaluative criterion for identifying attainment or performance outcomes of learning or apprenticeship. This process is conventionally materialized through curriculum design that embodies learning outcome statements. Stenhouse (1975, also see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) suggested that the contents of a, any, curriculum, which shapes teaching-learning schemes, reflect the selection of particular aspects of a valued culture. Seen in this light the notion of language proficiency is very much an artefact created by language education professionals who claim expertise in determining the contents of teaching-learning and criteria for evaluation of learner performance.

2 Language proficiency – the communicative era

English language teaching has been concerned with the fabric of the focal language, namely vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence- or clause-level grammar and other aspects of the rule-governed structure. Up until the mid-20th century, irrespective of the different classroom teaching approaches such as grammar translation or the ‘direct’ method, the teaching syllabus had tended to be largely populated by lexicogrammatical items, often rehearsed through usages that were deemed to be of practical value. The growing realization that the ability to use a language involved more than learning the fabric of a language led to an increasing awareness that much more attention should be directed to aspects of language in actual use (see for example Breen and Candlin 1980; Brumfit and Johnson 1979; Littlewood 1984; Savignon 1972; Widdowson 1978). In this period the works of anthropologists such as Gumperz (1964); Hymes and Gumperz (1972), and Hymes (1964/1972), deploying ethnographic observations, explored the concept of communicative competence – the ways in which people used language for communication in acceptable ways in a variety of social settings. By tying language use to social context this body of research provided a conceptual basis for language curriculum designers to take account of language use in context in a principled way. The four basic research questions related to communicative competence posed by Hymes (1964/1972: 281, original italics) can be seen as a conceptual space for the integration of language use with communication and culture:

- 1) Whether (and to what degree) something is formally *possible*;
- 2) Whether (and to what degree) something is *feasible* in virtue of the means of implementation available;

- 3) Whether (and to what degree) something is *appropriate* (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
- 4) Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually *performed*, and what its doing entails.

The curricular and pedagogic relevance of these primarily research-oriented questions for interrogating fieldwork data did not escape the notice of language educators and curriculum designers, particularly question #1 and #3. The work of Canale and Swain (Canale 1983; Canale and Swain 1980a, 1980b) can be seen as representing a good deal of the thinking among language educators and researchers in developing a theoretical basis for communicative language teaching at the time. Following the research and theorising of Hymes and others, they suggest that communicative competence was made up of four components:

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- 1 Grammatical competence – This taps into ‘... knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology’ (Canale and Swain 1980a: 29).
 - 2 Sociolinguistic competence – This ‘... addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purpose of interaction, and norms and conventions of interaction ...’ (Canale 1983: 7).
 - 3 Discourse competence – This is related to ‘[u]nity of a text [that] is achieved through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning’ (Canale 1983: 9). Cohesion refers to the ways in which propositional content in utterances and statements is linked textually through pronouns, synonyms and other sign posting devices. Coherence refers to the relationships between different meanings that hold together for interlocutors (Also see Halliday and Hasan 1976).
 - 4 Strategic competence – This is directly concerned with learner language use. It deals with the learning and effective use of ‘verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may be called into action for two reasons: (a) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication (e.g. momentary inability to recall an idea or grammatical form) or due to insufficient competence one or the other [competences] above; and (b) to enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g. deliberate slow and soft speech for rhetorical effect)’ (Canale 1983: 11).
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The first two components correspond closely to the first (formal possibility) and the third (acceptability and appropriateness) questions posed by Hymes. The third component deals with discourse competence. This can be seen as an extension of the second component which is concerned with acceptability and appropriateness of language use; from a teaching point of view a piece of language use that is textually disjointed at sentential or inter-sentential level is unlikely to be regarded as acceptable, even if not inappropriate. At first sight, the fourth component

‘strategic competence’ seems to point to a particular aspect of learner language use. However, Hymes’s second question (feasibility) can be related to the issue of (limited) learner capacity and knowledge to use language *in situ*, and the fourth question (whether something is in fact done) is related to the legal principle of *factum valet*: an act which is otherwise prohibited by rule is valid when it happens nevertheless. The extemporaneous, perhaps unconventional, use of linguistic and prosodic resources to try to achieve communication can be seen in this light.

The seminal paper by Canale and Swain (1980a) entitled ‘Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Language Teaching and Testing’ was widely regarded as the key reference for the then emerging Communicative Language Teaching approach that impacted on English¹ language teaching worldwide. The social dimension of communicative language use in context particularly commanded a great deal of attention of teachers and teacher educators; it provided the impetus for change and development. For instance, Johnson (2001: 182–3) acknowledged that:

... in the early 1970, a ‘sociolinguistic revolution’ took place, where the emphasis given in linguistics to grammar was replaced by an interest in ‘language in use’ ... The sociolinguistic revolution had a great effect on language teaching ... [It] was responsible for the development of a type of syllabus which aimed to cater for the teaching of language in use – of communicative competence.

In a similar vein Hedge (2000: 44–5; original italics) observed that:

The communicative movement in ELT ... has, as one of its bases, a concept of what it means to know a language and to be able to put that knowledge to use in communicating with people in a variety of settings and situations. One of the earliest terms of this concept was *communicative competence*...

The highly influential Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001, 2020) draws on the tenets of Communicative Language Teaching approach explicitly. As the CEFR is designed to inform teaching and assessment of languages (not just English) in Europe, there is no doubt that the concept of communicative competence has spread widely. The fact that the CEFR has been adopted by many education jurisdictions at school and university levels beyond Europe points to the global reach of communicative competence as a cornerstone in language teaching (e.g. Block 2003; Leung 2005, 2011; Read 2019).

¹ Some of the work of Canale and Swain also connected with the teaching of French in Canada.

3 Recontextualization – from research to curriculum

By all accounts the ethnographic impulse, as represented by the works of Gumpers, Hymes and others, made a significant impact on the conceptual framing of English language curriculum design and teaching. The transfer of a set of discipline-oriented research concerns to educational practice is, however, not straightforward because they address different constituencies and needs with diverse ontological commitments, epistemic sensitivities, and ideological leanings. Following Stenhouse's (1975) observation that curriculum tends to represent an assemblage of select aspects of valued culture, it would be a good idea to pay closer attention to the ways in which some of the key tenets of communicative competence as a concept in research have been rendered in language teaching in this particular case. The work of Bernstein (2000) on recontextualization of ideas from one field into another is relevant here. The fundamental question is: How were the ethnographically oriented research concerns taken up in the transfer to language curriculum and pedagogy? After all, teachers' professional concerns for classroom teaching are not exactly the same as that of researchers' involved in field work. Bernstein suggests that the process of transfer from one field to another creates a recontextualization field which comprises two further fields of operation: Official Recontextualizing Field and Pedagogic Recontextualizing Field.

The Official Recontextualizing Field is normally 'created and dominated by the state for the construction and surveillance of state pedagogic discourse' (op. cit.: 115). The Pedagogic Recontextualization Field is generally made up of 'trainers of teachers, writers of textbooks, curricular guides, etc., specialise media and their authors' (loc.cit). The activities in these fields are meant to lead to descriptions, and often prescriptions, of disciplinary content from different standpoints and for different purposes. The case of English language is a little more complicated for reasons of its internationalized constitution.

The teaching of English as an additional/second language (as distinct from teaching English as a first/societal language subject at school and university levels in Anglophone countries) spans across national education systems and international business. English as an additional/second language is part of public education provision in predominantly English-speaking countries for students with diverse multilingual backgrounds. English as a foreign language as a school subject is widely taught in many countries where national ministries have jurisdiction over curriculum and assessment matters. There is also a large internationalized English language industry operating in the business sector outside national governmental control in terms of curriculum and pedagogy. So the idea of

a singular Official Recontextualizing Field does not apply neatly, although, generally speaking, national ministries in different world locations have tended to be influenced by the English language expertise hailing from the Anglophone academy and related business services (Holliday 2006). Conceptually, this is a connecting point with the Pedagogic Recontextualization Field.

There is a good case for suggesting that English language teaching as a worldwide commercial enterprise has to work with the pushes and pulls of the demands of the market; market forces can and do exert influence on the way in which English language is packaged as a product, just as other internationalized businesses respond to their market conditions. This somewhat invisible supranational influence can be directly linked to the Pedagogic Recontextualizing Field. The concept of communicative competence, recontextualized as Communicative Language Teaching, has profoundly shaped the work of teacher educators, textbook writers, test developers and publishers working within the substantial English language teaching industry since the 1980s.² In addition, internationally recognized curriculum, teaching and assessment frameworks such as the CEFR and the internationally marketed large-scale English language tests can assert (and reinforce) a significant influence on the shaping of English language as an educational package both in the commercial and public sectors. For instance, many textbooks and tests are explicitly articulated to CEFR levels which are built on the concept of communicative competence. The internationalized and market-sensitive nature of English language teaching has in effect blended the Official and Professional Recontextualizing Fields together.³ Another way of describing this development is to invoke the Kuhnian concept of ‘paradigm’ (Kuhn 1970; Orman 2016; Wray 2011) which points to periodic sedimentations of disciplinary matrixes of ideas and practices. The interesting question here is: What has been recontextualized from the ethnographically oriented research concerns?

A key recontextualizing move in relation to communicative competence occurred at the conceptual level. Theorizing and empirical research-generated knowledge are inherently unstable because the very nature of this kind of knowing and understanding is always provisional, subject to emerging and additional insights and further revision. While teaching can include a research dimension, e.g. individual or group initiated project-based study, on the whole though it has to be seen to be founded on a curricular base with a degree of epistemic certainty,

² It was report in 2018 that in the UK alone the English language sector supported 37,500 jobs and generated £1.4 billion worth of business (<https://www.englishuk.com/facts-figures#value>).

³ A detailed historical account of the arguments, actions and interactions of the key actors is beyond the scope of this article. Davies’s (2008) account of the development of a particular language testing system is a good example of this kind of reflexive study.

durability and stability, particularly at learning levels below the most advanced. At the same time, on a practical level the need to organize teaching content and materials for students of different ages and stages of learning in advance of the teaching-learning activities also means that some ‘authoritative’ learning content has to be established in a programmatic manner, often in the form of a teaching syllabus. So in teaching there is a general need to specify what is to be taught. This shift of priority in teaching turns away from research concerns and puts a premium on research-generated information and insight as valued knowledge. Dubin (1989: 174, emphasis added) observed that:

... it is apparent that over time there has been a shift away from an agenda for finding out what is happening in a community regarding language use to a set of statements about what an **idealized curriculum for L2 learning/acquisition** should entail ... [The concept of communicative competence] has moved away from being a societally-grounded theory in terms of describing and dealing with actual events and practices of communication which take place within particular cultures. (Also see Leung 2005: 123)

This conceptual level of recontextualization took on a particular slant in English language teaching.

If the recontextualized concept of communicative competence for language teaching is fundamentally modelled on what people do and say in social interaction, then it would be obvious that language teaching would need to cover a very wide range of language use in different social domains and contexts. However, it would be impractical for any curriculum to provide such coverage on practical grounds alone, some form of selection had to be made. Given that the ‘sociolinguistic revolution’ (Johnson, see earlier) was about ‘what it means to know a language and to be able to put that knowledge to use in communicating with people in a variety of settings and situations’ (Hedge, earlier), it is quite clear the social dimension of language use was at the heart of the shift in conceptualizing language proficiency. The earlier reference to this point in Canale (1983: 7, underlining added), now shown in fuller detail, provides a useful indicator:

Sociolinguistic competence. This competence, broadly speaking, deals with what Hymes (1972, 1974) would call the rules of use: [it] addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purposes of the interaction, and norms or conventions of interaction ... Appropriateness of utterances refers to ... appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of meaning concerns the extent to which particular communicative functions (e.g. commanding, complaining and inviting), attitudes (including politeness and formality) and ideas are judged to be proper in a given situation.

‘Appropriateness’ seems to be the operative word. As discussed earlier curriculum design involves selective inclusion of aspects of valued culture for teaching

content. In this case the focus on ‘appropriateness’ appeared to have served as a criterial consideration. What counts as appropriate language use has to be gauged in context, and language use is part of virtually all types of social interaction. As a (any) language curriculum could not possibly cover all types of social interaction, some form of selection had to be made. The issue here is: How do we gauge appropriateness and from whose perspective?

Additional language education is conscious of the fact that it is dealing with a ‘target’ language. Given that the ‘sociolinguistic revolution’ was spurred on by a desire to model teaching-learning on what people would do and say in real-life contexts, it was relatively easy to see how real language elided with real people, the native speakers of the target language. And there is very little doubt that this view was embedded in curriculum frameworks and teaching materials. The following quotes are by no means exceptional in the discussions and curriculum materials published at the turn of the ‘sociolinguistic revolution:

Knowledge of what a native speaker is likely to say in a given context is to us a crucial component of second language learners’ competence to understand second language communication and to express themselves in a native like way ... (Canale and Swain 1980a, 1980b: 16)

Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. (CEFR, 2001:24 – B2 Global Scale)

Judging from the published English language curriculum and assessment frameworks and textbook materials in the past five decades, there has been a very strong tendency to focus on a particular type of language use and the associated lexicogrammatical resources. Even a cursory glance at the topics, themes, vocabulary, grammar and language expressions in the internationally marketed textbooks would suggest that the teaching content gravitates around a number of recognisable themes: self-disclosure of learners’ own identities (e.g. who I am, where I come from, what I do), holiday and travel, college/school life, future career, hobbies and pastimes such as art, music and sports, work and study, and ‘global’ issues such as the environment (see Leung 2013, 2014 for a further discussion). The language register associated with these themes can be characterized as relatively unemotional and transaction-oriented, generally used in the public domain with other people who are not closely related (to oneself), and whose social affiliation and social distance to oneself is not necessarily fixed or stable, e.g. fellow students, work place or professional colleagues. This is the type of language use that has been characterized by Wolfson (1986) as the ‘bulge’ (see Figure 1), which comprises pre-patterned or predictable language expressions used by middle-class Americans, and more generally,

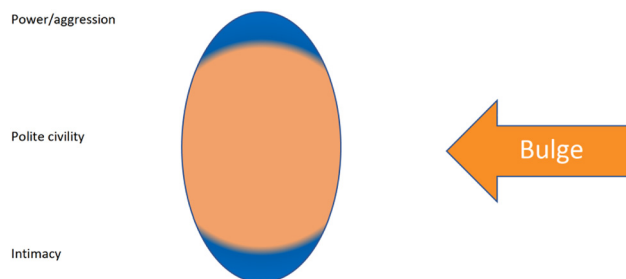


Figure 1: The bulge: polite civility.

middle-class English speakers in other Anglophone communities for everyday functions such as apologising, complimenting, complaining, describing, greeting, requesting and so on (also see Cook 2000).

In public settings where the participants of an interaction do not have any family links or share other strong personal affiliations, social relationships can be fluid and very often they are open to moment-by-moment negotiation. In such circumstances participants may wish to signal goodwill and social solidarity where appropriate, and to avoid conflict or confrontation where possible. This is the kind of polite and non-offensive use of front-stage language that has been chosen as sociolinguistically appropriate for public interactions and transactions. The corollary of this selection is that the putative learner is likely to benefit from being able to use this kind of language. And it is this kind of language use that has populated language teaching materials. The variegated language of aggression and contestation, and the language of intimacy, which may also be less predictable and pre-patterned, and some of it is likely to be not very public, tends not to figure very much, if at all (Leung and Lewkowicz 2019; Leung and Street 2017).

The selection of bulge language as manifestation of appropriate language for language teaching appears to have been supported by a high level of consensus amongst curriculum designers, textbook writers, assessment professionals and publishers. Gray's (2007, 2010a, 2010b) analyses of the carrier contents of textbooks show a preponderance of socially and culturally non-controversial themes related to world of (white-collar) work, celebrities and life style matters that were consistent with ideological articulations of late capitalism. The analysis of the carrier contents of the practice materials of an internationally marketed English language test by Noori and Mirhosseini (2021) identifies education, entertainment/leisure, money and nature as the main topics. The authors also observe that the content materials appear to carry an ideological narrative representing tenets of capitalism and globalization from a western, mainly Anglophone, cultural

perspective. In one way or another, there seems to be a tendency among the professionals in English language teaching and assessment to converge on the bulge. It may well be that this tendency to fasten on to the bulge is motivated by the idea that it represents the type of language use that has the widest possible communicative utility; thus it can provide learners with a high return for their efforts. Marketing considerations are also likely to come into play here. A good deal of English language teaching materials is marketed internationally. Commercially it would not make sense to produce sensitive materials that would trigger hostile responses on cultural, political, social and/or religious grounds. It has been quite widely reported that the acronym PARSNIP is used by publishers to authors and textbook writers of topics to be avoided: politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms (e.g. communism) and pork (see for example <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/14/pigs-textbooks-oup-authors-pork-guidelines>). It can be argued that this selective and reductionist modelling and representation of English is a form of reification. How far these apparently settled assumptions and interpretations of the social dimension provide an adequate basis for the construal of language proficiency is a moot point.

4 Destabilizing *status quo*

Over the years research in the broad fields of applied linguistics, academic literacies and language education has raised issues that are related to the efficacy of the *ancien régime*, so to speak, of the bulge-modelled universalist version of communicative competence. For instance, ethnographic observations of the uses of language for academic purposes have pointed to the diverse literacy practices in different disciplines (e.g. Lea and Street 1998, 2006; Leung and Street 2014; Scott and Lillis 2008, among others). Corpus-based studies have also shown that there are significant variations across disciplines in terms of content-related text types, modes of argument, referencing, and authorial voice (e.g. Biber 2006; Nesi and Gardner 2012; Staples et al. 2018; Tribble and Wingate 2013; Weigle and Friginal 2015; Wingate 2015). And these variations do not appear to have been reflected in the communicative writing tasks in the established language tests (e.g. Staples et al. 2018). Classroom studies of language use have point to the wide range of language use, e.g. disputing teacher's judgements, mock insults, that fall outside the bulge range (e.g. Leung et al. 2004; Leung and Street 2012, 2017). From the point of view of language use in broader social contexts, the research in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and flexible multilingualism/translanguaging has raised particularly significant questions as to the assumed wholesale validity of the

bulge-modelled version of communicative competence. I will now look at the salience of the work in these two bodies of research for the present discussion.

As indicated earlier the recontextualization of communicative competence for English language teaching adopted the native speaker as the key reference point for modelling language norms and language uses. On this view, language communication has been construed in terms of native speaker-addition/second language speaker interaction. The native speaker model has been in effect the basis of selecting particular constellations of lexicogrammar and transactional-functional discourse expressions for teaching purposes. In addition, it has also been used to anchor and instantiate the idea of ‘appropriateness’ in terms of social conventions of language use (e.g. directness, politeness and formality) and linguacultural norms. The work in ELF to date, taken as a whole, has disrupted this native speaker-centric view.

It is now widely recognized that English is used by speakers of other languages, with or without the presence of native speakers of English, for a variety of business, educational, governmental and scientific purposes in different world locations. The empirical investigations into the ways in which English, as a linguistic resource, is used show that native speaker model is not necessarily being adhered to. The pronunciation repertoire features identified by Jenkins (2000, 2022) have provided clear indications of the features of English phonology that should be observed for effective communication, for instance, all consonant sounds except the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, and those that are not. The Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English developed by Seidlhofer and her colleagues (2001–2007, <https://varieng.helsinki.fi/CoRD/corpora/VOICE/>), and the Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings by Mauranen and her colleagues (2003, <https://www2.helsinki.fi/en/researchgroups/english-as-a-lingua-franca-in-academic-settings>) have shown that the lexicogrammatical features of English can be adapted to support communicative utility, for instance, Ø-marking of 3rd person –s in present simple/infinite tense, uncountable to count nouns (e.g. information to informations). The study of pragmatics in social interactions mediated through the use of ELF has shown that the putative norms and practices of the native speaker are not necessarily followed. To the extent that participants in ELF mediated interactions do not necessarily share a similar linguacultural background, it is unlikely that they would automatically assume that their own linguacultural knowledge and expectations would be shared by the others. In this kind of scenario, negotiations and adjustments regarding directness/indirectness, giving face, accommodations of pronunciation and use of participants’ own languages and so on would be needed to accomplish communication (e.g. Cogo and House 2017; Jenkins 2022; Widdowson 2015). All of this signals a major departure from the native speaker reference. Kankaanranta and

Planken (2010: 400, also see Cogo 2012) provide a succinct characterization of the situated use of ELF for business purposes:

English is not conceptualized as a language spoken in the United Kingdom, the United States, or other officially English-speaking regions, but as an international code and operating language used at work, to do work.

Their study affirms the picture that has been building up in ELF research in other domains. In brief, for participants in ELF-mediated communication:

- native speaker-like pronunciation is not regarded as essential
- clarity of meaning is at a premium (i.e. not correctness, grammar mistakes of little consequence in spoken interaction)
- professional knowledge and terminology related to the business at hand is an important component
- participants' own linguaculture is taken into account in communication (e.g. directness-indirectness)
- accommodation of one another's English proficiency is pragmatically accomplished locally (emergent, dynamic)
- the use of multilingualism is a part of communication practice.

It is quite clear that ELF mediated communication diverges from the native speaker norms in terms of lexicogrammatical features and pragmatic use with localized characteristics. This undermines the assumption that the reference to the native speaker is universally valid. Furthermore, the use of other languages in ELF-mediated communication has pointed to the need to consider the multilingual dimension of ELF in use. Research data has pointed to the use of participants' own language/s as an integral part of the linguistic resources being called upon to serve communicative purposes, e.g. Leung and Jenkins (2020) (for a further discussion, see Batziakas 2016; Cogo and Dewey 2012: chapter 5). This raises a conceptual issue about the monolingual assumption associated with the reference to native speaker norms and practices. Jenkins (2015: 55) comments: '... ELF, with its fluidity and 'online' negotiation of meaning among interlocutors with varied multilingual repertoires, could not be considered as consisting of bounded varieties, but as English that transcends boundaries ...'.

The phenomenon of multilingual communication has also been explored extensively in the research into translanguaging.⁴ As it is well-known the concept of translanguaging was first discussed as an approach to language teaching and

⁴ Other labels for this phenomenon include: code-meshing, flexible multilingualism, metrolingualism, polylingualism etc. In another epistemological paradigm, multilingualism in use is referred to as code-switching.

learning. The central idea is that the teaching-learning process can be enhanced if learners are able to draw on their own language to assist the learning of the focal language, and to promote learners' multilingualism. The term 'translanguaging' itself is a translation from the Welsh 'trawsieithu' (Baker 2001); the coinage is attributed to Cen Williams, a Welsh educator who in the 1980s developed a pedagogical practice of using two languages in Welsh classrooms for teaching and learning, against the backdrop of Welsh language endangerment in a largely English-speaking Wales. In recent years the concept of translanguaging has been vastly expanded to cover a diverse range of settings where linguistic resources from two or more languages are used to accomplish communication in different educational contexts such as India, Europe and North America (e.g. Anderson and Lightfoot 2018; Canagarajah 2011; Cenoz and Gorter 2017a, 2017b; Creese and Blackledge 2010; García 2009; García and Kleyn 2016; García and Li 2014; García and Lin 2016; García and Sánchez 2015; Leung and Valdéz 2019; Paulsrud et al. 2017, 2021). The concept has also provided an impetus to explore the implications of translanguaging for enhancing socio-cognitive and educational capacity (García et al. 2017; Li 2018; also Jaspers 2018) and linguistic typological issues⁵ (Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Otheguy et al. 2015, 2018; also; MacSwan 2017). In addition, translanguaging has provided a conceptual platform to debunk hegemonic monolingual assumptions about language hierarchies, linguistic worth, and power relations between groups with different linguistic and racial backgrounds (see e.g. Flores 2019; Poza 2017).

Irrespective of the different facets of translanguaging as an educational, linguistic and sociopolitical phenomenon, at its centre is the observation that language users can draw on all their linguistic resources at their disposal to communicate with others. Otheguy et al. (2015: 281) capture this well:

Translanguaging is the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages.

This is a salient point for the present discussion. In ethnolinguistically diverse societies, e.g. USA and UK, where English is the dominant language, translanguaging involving English and community languages is an everyday phenomenon in many business, community and institutional settings, including schools and colleges. It follows that the notion of English language proficiency cannot be usefully construed just in monolingual terms, since many members of society would be translanguaging in their everyday communication practices. In

⁵ Some of this debate predates the current translanguaging scholarship. See, for example, Hopper (1998).

any case, people from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds are likely to come into contact with one another in one way or another. The same question can be asked of multilingual societies with English as an official language, e.g. India, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Africa. If we also take account of the multilingual dimension of ELF, as discussed earlier, then it becomes obvious that validity of any monolingually framed notion of language proficiency has to be questioned, particularly in relation to additional/second language education.

5 Something old and something new – a watershed moment?

The removal of the native speaker as a universal point of reference and monolingualism in language use as domain assumptions have destabilized the conceptual foundations of Communicative Language Teaching as it was developed in the 1970s and 1980s. The intellectual parameters associated with the ‘sociolinguistic revolution’ in language teaching appear to be in need of bolstering. The research and theorising that we have looked at thus far point to another watershed moment. Once again we are at a juncture where empirical research in the related fields of applied linguistics, language education and multilingualism, is showing the possible directions for further thinking and development. As we have seen earlier, recontextualizing ideas from research to application in education is by no means a straightforward matter. At this point it would be instructive to examine some of the conceptual shifts and associated operationalization issues that are beginning to emerge. I will now turn to the developments in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001, 2020) as a case *par excellence*. The Companion Volume of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020) revises and extends the original 2001 publication. Given the focus of this discussion my attention here is on the expanded notion of mediation, particularly plurilingual mediation. This expansion can be seen as a welcome attempt to embrace contingency, dynamic fluidity and multilingualism in interactional language use as part of language proficiency.

The notion of mediation in the 2001 edition was primarily discussed in relation to cross-lingual translation and interpretation. For instance, mediation in relation to interpretation was formulated as:

Interlocutor (Lx) ↔ discourse (Lx) ↔ USER ↔ discourse (Ly) ↔ Interlocutor (Ly)

(Council of Europe 2001: 14)

This somewhat technical formulation suggests that the two languages involved are bounded entities, and the user is the multilingual mediator who tries to facilitate communication in social interaction by rendering meaning in one language accessible in another for fellow participants. In the 2020 Companion Volume mediation can take place in the same language or across languages, and it plays a much broader and more active part in social interaction than in the 2001 version:

[Mediation is] a social and cultural process of creating conditions for communication and cooperation, facing and hopefully defusing any delicate situations and tensions that may arise. Particularly with regard to cross-lingual mediation, users should remember that this inevitably also involves social and cultural competence as well as plurilingual competence. (Council of Europe 2020: 91)

This characterization seems to put a premium on conviviality and harmonious social interaction which would, *inter alia*, require the mediator to have empathetic sensitivity to fellow participants' linguacultural backgrounds:

A person who engages in mediation activity needs to have a well-developed emotional intelligence, or an openness to develop it, in order to have sufficient empathy for the viewpoints and emotional states of other participants in the communicative situation.

(Council of Europe 2020: 91)

Multilingualism, or plurilingualism⁶ in CEFR terminology, has an open and fluid character. A plurilingual person does not keep their languages in 'separate mental compartments but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact', and a plurilingual 'can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor' (Council of Europe 2001: 4). This view of plurilingual speakers is re-affirmed in the Companion Volume which gives them licence 'to use all their linguistic resources when necessary, encouraging them to see similarities and regularities as well as differences between languages and cultures' (Council of Europe 2020: 30). The dynamism, fluidity and openness in this approach to plurilingualism extend to dialects and varieties of any language and a plurilingual speaker can have varying levels of knowledge of their languages. Overall plurilingualism involves:

- ... the ability to call flexibly upon an inter-related, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire to:
 - switch from one language or dialect (or variety) to another;
 - express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety) and understand a person speaking another;

⁶ In the CEFR 'multilingualism' is generally used to refer to the societal presence of more than one language. A plurilingual is a person who knows and can use more than one language.

- call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, or varieties) to make sense of a text;
- recognize words from a common international store in a new guise;
- mediate between individuals with no common language (or dialect, or variety), even with only a slight knowledge oneself;
- bring the whole of one's linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression;
- exploit paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression, etc.).

(Council of Europe 2020: 30)

Taken as a whole the conceptual characterizations of plurilingualism and mediation in the CEFR are more or less in line with the broad findings in ELF and translanguaging research. On this evidence, the CEFR is in tune with intellectual sensibilities associated with the work in ELF, translanguaging and contingent language use in general.

For reasons of scope and space, we will now look at the one of the proficiency rating scales under the broad heading of mediation: Acting as an intermediary in informal situations (with friends and colleagues) to take a closer look at the transfer of conceptual articulation to curricular application as an illustrative case (see Figure 2). This scale covers 'situations in which the user/learner as a plurilingual individual mediates across languages and cultures to the best of their ability in an informal situation in the public, private, occupational or educational domain' (op.cit.: 115). This scale offers an exemplification of mediation-in-action. I will comment on two issues: plurilingualism and type/s of social interaction and associated language use.

The descriptors in this scale clearly show that plurilingualism-in-action is interpreted in terms of moving from one language to another, Language A to Language B, at all levels of proficiency without exception. This formulation is strongly suggestive of a compartmentalized view of languages as bounded entities. The language user, *qua* mediator, is expected to switch between bounded languages and distinct linguacultures, not the fluidity and flexibility portrayed in the conceptual discussions. There is a disjuncture between conceptualization and operationalization of plurilingualism.

In terms of the type/s of social interaction and language use being projected through the level descriptors, it would be reasonable to say that there is a strong sense that they are mainly concerned with the efficacy of information transfer from one language to another. For instance, the phrasing of the three descriptors below:

... can communicate ... other people's personal details and very simple, predictable information ... provided other people help with formulation. (A1),

Can communicate fluently ... the sense of what is said ... on a wide range of subjects of personal, academic and professional interest, conveying significant information clearly and concisely as well as explaining cultural references. (C1), and

	Acting as an intermediary in informal situations (with friends and colleagues)
C2	Can communicate in a clear, fluent, well-structured way (in Language B) the sense of what is said (in Language A) on a wide range of general and specialised topics, maintaining appropriate style and register, conveying finer shades of meaning and elaborating on sociocultural implications.
C1	Can communicate fluently (in Language B) the sense of what is said (in Language A) on a wide range of subjects of personal, academic and professional interest, conveying significant information clearly and concisely as well as explaining cultural references.
B2	Can mediate (between Language A and Language B) conveying detailed information, drawing the attention of both sides to background information and sociocultural cues, and posing clarification and follow-up questions or statements as necessary. Can communicate (in Language B) the sense of what is said in a welcome address, anecdote or presentation in their field (given in Language A), interpreting cultural cues appropriately and giving additional explanations when necessary, provided the presenter stops frequently in order to allow time for them to do so. Can communicate (in Language B) the sense of what is said (in Language A) on subjects within their fields of interest, conveying and when necessary explaining the significance of important statements and viewpoints, provided the interlocutors give clarifications if needed.
B1	Can communicate (in Language B) the main sense of what is said (in Language A) on subjects within their fields of interest, conveying straightforward factual information and explicit cultural references, provided they can prepare beforehand and that the interlocutors articulate clearly in everyday language. Can communicate (in Language B) the main sense of what is said (in Language A) on subjects of personal interest, while following important politeness conventions, provided the interlocutors articulate clearly and they can ask for clarification and pause to plan how to express things.
A2	Can communicate (in Language B) the overall sense of what is said (in Language A) in everyday situations, following basic cultural conventions and conveying the essential information, provided this is articulated clearly and they can ask for repetition and clarification. Can communicate (in Language B) the main point of what is said (in Language A) in predictable everyday situations, conveying back and forth information about personal wants and needs, provided other people help with formulation.
A1	Can communicate (in Language B) other people's personal details and very simple, predictable information (in Language A), provided other people help with formulation.
Pre-A1	No descriptors available

Figure 2: Acting as an intermediary in informal situations (with friends and colleagues) (Council of Europe 2020: 116).

Can communicate in a clear, fluent, well-structured way (in Language B) the sense of what is said (in Language A) on a wide range of general and specialised topics ... (C2)

strongly indicates that the framing is oriented to language knowledge and skills and linguacultural knowledge at different levels of sophistication. Whether it is possible to pitch linguacultural knowledge at different levels of proficiency is itself a moot point. It is quite easy to see that a person may be multiculturally well-versed but may be unable to use that knowledge due to insufficient language ability. Furthermore, an impression is given that linguaculture is seen as pre-established bodies of knowledge, and it can be called into action without the mediator being

sensitive to the need for in-the-moment adaptation that takes into account interactional dynamics, interlocutor dispositions and culturally complex etiquettes such as face-giving/saving. Why is ‘drawing the attention of both sides to background information and sociocultural cues’ rated at B2, and not at any other level? The assigning of levels for mediation activities seems arbitrary. This also raises the issue of the apparent disappearance of emotional intelligence.

As we noted earlier, the mediator is meant to have a ‘well-developed emotional intelligence ... in order to have sufficient empathy for the viewpoints and emotional states of other participants in the communicative situation’. In this rating scale there is little to suggest that emotional intelligence is being considered systematically. ‘Drawing the attention of both sides to background information and sociocultural cues’ is a good case in point. It can reasonably be argued that whether and when to draw other participants’ attention to relevant background information is at least in part influenced by the mediator’s empathetic appreciation of other participants’ communication needs in diverse interactional settings. There is, however, little textual indication that emotional intelligence underpins consistently across all the enumerated and graded level descriptors under discussion here. It may well be that emotional intelligence is not a unitary quality that can be pre-described, rated and ranked, with the corollary that empathy cannot be defined solely from observed language expressions – not saying something – the strategy of ‘let it pass’ – in certain contexts can also be an emotionally intelligent thing to do (For a more detailed discussion, see Leung in press).

6 A long(er) view – what do we need to know?

In this discussion we have seen two significant conceptual and theoretical shifts in the ways additional/second language proficiency is understood. Both the ‘sociolinguistic revolution’ of the 1970s and 1980s, and the more recent (and on-going) de-emphasizing of the native speaker as a universal reference, and the inclusion of local in-the-moment language practices that are not monolingually constituted have helped to capture more of the diverse manifestations of language in social interactions. However, in both cases the recontextualization process has led to the reformulation of some of the original research-generated insights and knowledge. From the over-attention to the bulge type of language in Communicative Language Teaching to the curious mis-step in the CEFR’s interpretation of its own flexible and fluid conceptualization of plurilingualism in terms of moving from ‘Language B to Language A’. These are not incidental and inconsequential ‘academic’ issues though; they are centrally connected to the broader issues of curriculum design. As Stenhouse (see earlier) pointed out, the contents of any curriculum are likely to be

influenced by wider, and valued, sociocultural values. And these values vary because they are situated in particular educational environments within wider political economies. The tussles over the contents of the English (school subject) curriculum in England is a good illustrative case in an adjacent field (see Ellis 2014). The broader point here is that the apparently research-informed shifts in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment should not be taken at face value. Additional/second language education, just like other areas of education, has to be vigilant as to what any proposed changes and developments represent, and how they interact with different educational goals and priorities (For a further discussion see Leung and Scarino 2016).

In relation to additional/second language education, the two conceptual shifts that we have considered here also point to a specific curriculum issue: How far can we pre-specify and assess language proficiency without involving language users at a local level? In a way there is an intriguing tension: The inadequacies of the distally operationalized model of communicative English, as found in international textbooks, teaching programmes and assessment frameworks, have been highlighted by research in ELF, academic literacies and translanguaging that pay attention to local language practices. And yet, the closer we get to the local, the more difficult it is to pre-specify some key aspects of proficiency. The importance of emotional intelligence in effective mediation is a case in point. If we accept that meaning-driven purposeful language use in actual social interaction is necessarily contingent, dynamic and fluid in terms of discursive engagement and use of linguistic resources, then any pre-formulated exemplars used in teaching and assessment, however extensively assembled, cannot cover all possibilities. One argument in support of a distal model of proficiency is that the exemplars serve as an indicator of core knowledge and skills that can be applied in future.⁷ But this reasoning is unlikely to be sustainable if some of the components of proficiency in question escape any stable pre-description in the first place. It follows then that we might have to consider a number of basic questions in reflexive deliberations and empirical research in the next period.

The increasingly 'local' nature of research-informed insights into language use in social interaction have signalled the educational and pedagogic limitations of distally conceived universalist models of language proficiency. If language proficiency is primarily conceptualized as a situated phenomenon to be understood contingently with reference to the local exegesis of social interaction, we would need to address issues such as:

⁷ A similar position is taken in psychometrically oriented language testing, See Jenkins and Leung (2019).

- What do ‘local’ and ‘situated’ mean? Do they only refer to in-person here-and-now language communication? Does it include digitally mediated multilateral communication that can involve participants in different physical and temporal sites? Is there a need for conceptualizing different kinds of ‘situated local language practice’ with different analytic schemata (that can inform proficiency/ies)? For instance, private local (e.g. domestic social interaction)? Public local (e.g. the classroom or work place)?
- How would the different kinds of interactional initiatives (e.g. a participant asking a question to elicit further information) and responses be understood and evaluated in situated local proficiency terms? Do we need to pay attention to the content/subject matter of social interaction? How should the monolingual-translingual dimension be addressed? Whose (which participant/s) views and opinions should be taken into account? Do we need to factor in salient issues in social investigations such as class, ethnicity and gender? How do we recognise participant volition and emotional intelligence in social communication? Would these aspects of language use be gradable/ratable non-arbitrarily?
- Is there a need to establish the longevity or durability (in terms of real-world usefulness) of situated local language proficiencies? How often should we revisit any description of proficiency?
- Is there a principled way of determining the number of situated local proficiencies that would be needed in different educational, institutional, occupational professional and social settings?
- How might local proficiencies relate to one another?

A more decentred approach to language proficiency would need to address at least some of these inter-related conceptual and empirical questions (and no doubt many others that will come along as we go on). Educationally these enquiries can potentially yield data and insights that can help us throw light on some important practical issues. For instance, if we can establish a trustworthy knowledge of the ways in which language/s are being used for academic purposes in a particular university setting, we would be more informed as to the kind of language proficiency that would be fit-for purpose at a particular time. And as we address these issues, we should embrace the possibility that some aspects of language use in some contexts may not lend themselves to scripted description and categoric evaluation (e.g. pragmatic moves). Some aspects of language proficiency may be beyond static description. The shifting intellectual sensibilities have opened up an opportunity for us to re-think what counts as language proficiency in additional/second language education in contemporary contexts.

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