



## **Reimagining Language Competence: On professionalism**

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In its journey to become a global lingua franca, the English language has evolved and adapted to the needs and purposes of its users around the world. This has led to numerous variations in the language. While people are generally aware of these variations, it has not necessarily impacted definitions of language competence as used in ELT (and other educational contexts). It is therefore important for us to consider language variation as we reimagine language competence. Such a reimagining will have numerous professional implications in our work, e.g. in the context of teachers' professional development, testing and assessment, and curriculum and material development. We will explore some of these implications in this paper. However, before doing so, let us look at some ways in which we can reimagine language competence.

### **Reimagining Language Competence**

With the use of English as a global language, the old models of language that drew only on 'native speakers' have become anachronistic. The English language is now spoken by more people as part of their multilingual linguistic repertoire than as their only language (or as their mother tongue). This implies that an understanding of English language competence has to be grounded in an understanding of how the language varies across contexts as opposed to staying restricted to native speaker models.

#### *Three-Dimensional (3D) Framework of Language Variation*

Drawing on work by Michael Halliday and colleagues, we can identify three broad dimensions that need to be considered in how the English language varies around the world: users, uses, mode. The 'user' dimension helps us explore how people vary their language based on whether they are interacting with people who are relatively close to them in terms of social distance (e.g. family members, old classmates, etc.) or are relatively distant (e.g. strangers, co-professional, etc.)(see Wolfram, 2015, for some examples of how to draw on these user/dialectal variations in TESOL). The 'use' dimension helps us differentiate between the language used for everyday purposes and that used for specialised and technicalised purposes (see Lin 2016 for a discussion of Cummin's 1991 distinction between BICS/CALP in relation to the 3D framework). And, the 'mode' dimension helps us understand differences in oral-like, written-like, and multimodal discourses (see Derewianka, 2015, for the importance of this dimension for TESOL). Each of these three variables provides us with useful ways of explaining language variation; however, language

doesn't simply vary based on any single dimension, but rather varies along all three dimensions simultaneously. Figure 1 below provides a visual representation of this three-dimensional framework of language variation (Mahboob, 2017):

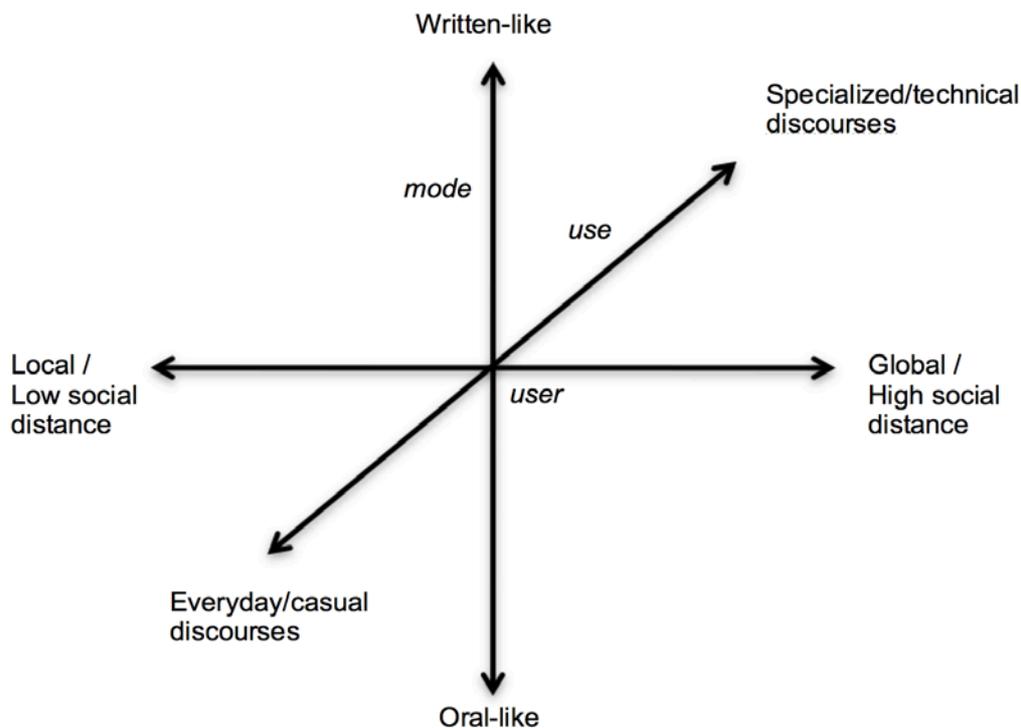


Figure 1: 3D framework of language variation (Source: Mahboob, 2017)

This framework helps us identify eight broad domains of language variation. These, along with some examples of types of language we would find in each domain, are provided in Table 1 below. It needs to be noted that there may be significant linguistic variations within each domain based on the specifics of who is using it, where, with whom, in which mode, and for what purpose.

Domains		Examples
1	Local, oral, everyday	Family members sharing stories about their day (note that English does not need to be a mother tongue of the interlocutors and that people may translanguage in these contexts)
2	Local, written, everyday	Old school friends exchanging social messages on an instant messenger; some locally produced textbooks
3	Local, oral, specialized	Members of an Indigenous community talking about the local weather system; some conference presentations at a local conference
4	Local, written, specialized	Newsletter produced by and for a rural community of farmers in a rural setting; some journals published by and for a local (academic/specialist) community
5	Global, oral, everyday	Casual conversations amongst people from different parts of the world

6	Global, written, everyday	International news agencies reporting on events; most English language textbooks produced for a global readership
7	Global, oral, specialized	Most international conference presentations
8	Global, written, specialized	Most academic papers published in international (disciplinary) journals

Table 1: Eight domains of language variation based on the 3D Framework

There are a few key observations to be made about how this framework relates to ELT and educational issues:

- The language that students bring to school from their home is that of domains 1 (and, perhaps, 2) and does not necessarily share ways of meaning with that of the language of school (which is typically domains 5 and 6).
- If teachers are aware of and attuned to the differences between the language of domains 1 & 2 and 5 & 6 (see, for example, Martin & Mathhiesen, 2015; Derewianka, 2015), they can teach these to their students.
- If teachers (or the curriculum) do not consider these differences in their teaching, then only some students are be able to understand and learn appropriate ways of using the language of domains 5 & 6 (and even fewer the language of domains 7 & 8).
- No one is a 'native' or 'mother-tongue' speaker of domains 7 & 8. The language of domains 7 & 8 evolves as people come together to focus on a particular specialised/technicalised issues; the backgrounds of the people who come together is not important here, but rather the focus is on what needs to be done through language.

The 3D framework can help us both explain and predict language variation. The framework does not draw on native or mother-tongue varieties of language as the norm, but rather acknowledges variations in the use of language, including people's ability to draw on and use multiple languages and semiotic systems (cf translanguaging, Garcia & Li Wei, 2013). If the 3D framework is taken as a way of understanding how language varies across people, purposes and modalities, then it also suggests that language proficiency/competence is dynamic and varies for both native and non-native speakers of a language across different contexts.

#### *Dynamic Approach to Language Proficiency (DALP)*

Variations in the English language, as discussed above, pose a challenge to traditional approaches to measuring language competence/proficiency. Currently, language tests benchmark performance against a 'standard', which is typically based on native speakers. Given that native or mother-tongue models of language do not represent how people use the English language around the world today and do not represent a true 'standard' language, the use of these models is inappropriate in measuring language proficiency or competence. One way of addressing this limitation is by drawing on the Dynamic Approach to Language Proficiency (DALP). DALP posits that being proficient in a language implies that one has the ability to select, adapt, negotiate and use a range of linguistic resources that are appropriate in that context and which are not dependent on native speaker norms

(Mahboob and Dutcher, 2015). DALP encourages us to consider the notion of a ‘resourceful’ learner, i.e., a learner who draws on a range of semiotic resources available in order to achieve their goals. In doing so, it shows an alignment with our understanding of language variation and thus may provide a way forward in developing ways to measure (English) language proficiency.

DALP draws on two core elements: shared linguistic code and shared contextual knowledge (Figure 2). Shared linguistic code is the user’s control of the myriad features of a language. Shared contextual knowledge is the user’s familiarity with and the ability to successfully negotiate the setting and purpose(s) of an event. These two elements can be seen as continua. The two continua intersect to form four ‘Zones of Proficiency’ and an individual’s Zone of Proficiency can change in a non-linear fashion depending on their knowledge of the linguistic code and the contextual features of a situation. Furthermore, DALP does not model an individual’s development of language upon their adherence to an outside (native speaker) norm, but rather their flexibility in negotiating communication in different contexts. Placing the basis of proficiency on communicative flexibility rather than solely on norm-adherence means that multilingualism is valued, as is the ability to negotiate different contexts within the same linguistic code. This implies that we appreciate the resourcefulness of a learner in drawing on multiple semiotic tools to achieve their goals.

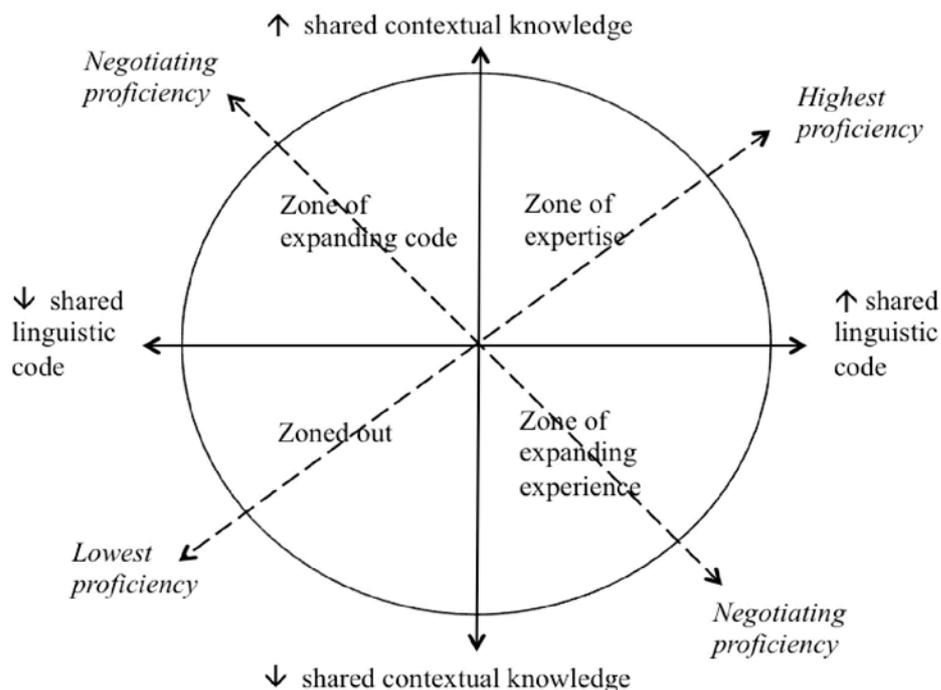


Figure 2: Dynamic Approach to Language Proficiency

### Some Implications of Reimagining Language Competence

Reimagining language competence in a way that moves us away from a static native speaker or a single standard model of language has implications for a range of professional issues in ELT and education. Below, we will briefly focus on three of these: teachers’ professional development, testing and assessment, and curriculum and material development.

### *Teachers' Professional Development*

Given the variations found in the English language today, it is essential for teacher education programs to train teachers to understand the nature of these variations and the implications of these for their students. Currently, many teacher professional development programs around the world use traditional (and perhaps generative/transformational) grammar as the main language/linguistics component in their curriculum. These models do not explain or predict how language varies in different contexts. As such, drawing on these models does not sufficiently prepare teachers to help their students in understanding and using language that is appropriate in different contexts. In many ways, teacher education programs today are anachronistic: they draw on descriptions of language that are obsolete and/or inappropriate for ELT. A useful analogy for this would be to imagine training doctors today based on the scientific beliefs and practices in medicine 200 years ago and/or training them based on research on reptile biology (instead of human biology). While this may appear to be an outrageous analogy, it is not an inappropriate one. Traditional grammars are based (with few changes) on early English grammars written over 200 years ago; and generative/transformational grammar are/were not designed for ELT purposes. Today, there are many other grammars of English (e.g. Systemic Functional Grammar, which I draw on in developing the 3D framework and DALP) that have been developed keeping in mind their application in educational contexts. These more 'applicable' models of language are starting to gain some influence in research in ELT, but are still largely underutilized in teacher professional development programs – something that, I argue, needs to change. We need to integrate grammars of language and models of language variation that are designed for educational purposes.

### *Testing and Assessment*

Most of the current standardised English language tests use native speaker norms of language as the benchmark and measure a test-taker's language proficiency against these. These tests typically measure the performance of how non-native speakers of English respond to items based on native speaker norms; and, native speakers are not expected to or required to take these tests. If, as discussed in the section on DALP earlier, language proficiency is not dependent on static native speaker models of the language, but on one's ability to be resourceful and to select, adapt, negotiate and use a range of linguistic resources that are appropriate in a particular context, then language tests can and should give us an indication of how both native and non-native speakers of a language are able to accommodate for and respond to language variation. Making a similar argument, Johnson Gerson (2008) argues that we need a new approach for assessing proficiency – one which accounts for language variation in different contexts. Such an assessment would help ascertain a test-taker's ability to adapt their use of language to different situations and their "responsiveness to assistance or feedback" (*ibid*) rather than their ability to respond to items based on static monolingual native speaker models. A reimagined method of assessment, perhaps based on DALP, would more accurately describe a person's (both native and non-native speakers of a language) potential ability to engage in new communities and situations. Such assessment will provide information on how an individual

might perform in new contexts and what type of support they may need to help them overcome any language challenges.

### *Curriculum and Material Development*

In a recently completed project, To and Mahboob (forthcoming) examined linguistic complexity of four EFL textbooks published by a major international press to explore if and how science and non-science texts included showed linguistic variation. We expected to find that science texts were more linguistically complex than non-science texts based on both the 3D framework and work on genre theory (e.g., Martin & Rose, 2008). The results of this study, however, did not show any meaningful differences between the two categories of texts in terms of linguistic complexity. This finding raises concerns that these textbooks do not sensitise students to how the language of science and non-science texts varies in authentic texts and thus does not prepare them to draw on these variations in both reading and writing texts in different specialised/technicalised fields. A failure to do this has a number of implications. For example, it leads to a common complaint by subject teachers that English language teachers do not do their jobs properly because students are unable to read and write texts in subject classes. While one may argue that subject teachers need to embed disciplinary language teaching within their own classes, subject teachers don't see this as their job (Lin, 2016). English language teachers, on the other hand, believe that they are fulfilling their jobs by teaching the curriculum and the material that they are assigned. One solution to this problem is to draw on understandings of language variation in designing curricula and developing ELT material. For example, textbooks can vary the language of science and non-science texts in ways that represent the field of specialisation and include activities and resources that help students to develop appropriate understandings of language as used in different disciplines and genres.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper argues that: 1) static, native speaker based models of language competence are inadequate; and 2) we need to reimagine language competence by drawing on models of language that can help us explain, predict and teach language variation. It further elaborates on how such a reimagining of language competence can influence teacher education programs, testing and assessment, and curriculum and material development. A change in these areas will impact classroom practices and enable students to become aware of how language varies in order to achieve different goals in different contexts and how they can use these understandings in their own lives. It will also allow us to develop approaches to language testing and assessment that are not based on uninformed native speaker models of language and that provide us information on the ability of any speaker of English – whether they are native speakers or non-native speakers of the language – to use their current linguistic knowledge to be resourceful in selecting, adapting, negotiating and using a range of linguistic resources to their advantage. To achieve these goals, we need to take a number of initiatives to introduce the concepts and develop the understanding of language variation among key stakeholders in the field: such as, administrators, material writers, policy makers, publishers, teachers, teacher educators and test developers, etc. Some of these include:

- continue research on language and language variation for the purpose of using this research in educational contexts;
- develop teacher education material that helps teachers understand and use their understandings of language variation to enable their students;
- develop tests and assessment practices that are not based on static native speaker norms and that can be used to assess both native and non-native speakers' ability to negotiate language variation; and,
- develop curricula and teaching resources that sensitise students to how language variation works in different contexts.

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