Reimagining English Competence
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In the 21st century, learning and teaching English has emerged as a major enterprise in the expanding global economy. With English proficiency increasingly equated with economic prosperity, national education systems around the world are incorporating English programs into the mandated national curriculum and expanding the delivery of those programs to children at lower and lower grade levels. In the new English language marketplace, English has become the most widely taught foreign language in schools across the world (Crystal, 2012).

So what does it mean to know English? How can we define English competence? The answer to these questions has important implications for designing both language policies and educational practices but may not necessarily be that straightforward. English learners have varying aims in developing English proficiency, and so what they need to know may or may not match what they are learning in their English classrooms. In this paper, I will examine English language learning in three different contexts, review comments from participants from online and roundtable discussions, and suggest recommendations based on the premise that we need multiple ways of defining English competence in order to meet the varying language use needs of our learners.

With the emergence of the proficiency movement in foreign language teaching in the 1980s (Lowe and Stansfield, 1988), what it meant to "know" English moved away from a focus on learning grammatical structures or becoming versed in the literature and cultures of English native speakers. Instead, prompted by the emergence of communicative teaching methodologies and language frameworks based on language use such as the Common European Framework of Reference (2001), ELT programs developed approaches designed to help learners operationalize what they learned about language in order to use that learning to communicate and act effectively in English. General proficiency was the basis for creating instructional aims and guided the development of the language materials and assessments used to support that instruction. From a proficiency point of view, language structures are connected to language use via communicative instructional activities that promote the activation of learned knowledge. In this approach, learning progresses through proficiency levels over time. Content, such as family relationships or job-related activities, are incorporated into language materials and instructional activities to practice and operationalize language structures; these topics move from simple to more complex as proficiency develops. This

proficiency model remains in wide spread use and is still relevant in some contexts to meet some learners' needs.

However, as English has taken on a more complex role in a variety of language use situations and is being used to address more diverse learner needs, we need another approach to defining what it means to know English. In this paper, rather than beginning with a focus on the structures of language, I propose we consider a different perspective, one that identifies the content and context of language use first and then moves to selecting the language structures that need to be learned. Instead of developing "general" English skills, learners develop English skills that will enable them to communicate specific content in specific contexts for specific purposes, to learn not just more English, but more *useful* English for particular contexts of use and content areas.

Since Inquiry is the principle guiding my exploration of English competence in this paper, I will look at how practice informs this second view of English competence by examining specific projects that have used content and context of use to identify language that will define what it means to "know" English.

Example #1: Lower Mekong Initiative: English for Economic Growth

The Lower Mekong Initiative is a language learning collaboration across five countries in Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The Initiative was developed in response to economic and political pressures in the region to increase the economic development and competitiveness of these countries within the ASEAN region and to strengthen their political presence. The avenue for achieving these goals was through building the capacity of human resources, namely professionals from each country's ministries and technical agencies representing specific fields such as health, connectivity, agriculture, environment, education, and energy. The participants in the Initiative formed working groups of professionals from relevant ministries and technical agencies across the five participating countries. English competence provided a unitary and neutral tool to support collaboration among working group members across borders in their respective fields of expertise and to enhance dialogue among scientists, technical professionals, and policy makers. English instruction was designed to increase participants' ability to communicate effectively in international meetings and to conduct effective oral presentations on topics in their fields of expertise. Thus, the **content** of their English lessons related to topics within specific professional fields. For example, within the health field, one topic was "universal healthcare for all citizens." The **context for using** English included presentations and interactions with colleagues at regional and international conferences. The **language** structures selected for learning focused on discourse texts related to communicative tasks such as delivering a presentation or participating in meetings, for example, asking for opinions, sharing opinions, asking or providing clarification. (For additional information about this project, see Nuangpolmak, 2017)

Example #2: WIDA Consortium: Standards for Academic English in K-12

WIDA is a US-based consortium of 33 states who together share English language development standards and assessments for meeting the needs of the English learners enrolled in Kindergarten through 12th grade classrooms in their respective states. These English learners need access to the academic content of their subject classes as they develop academic English skills. To meet this need, WIDA has developed a framework of standards and assessments that focus on academic English that will enable these learners to engage in the academic content of Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies as well as the social and instructional language students need to participate in US classrooms. Thus, the **content** they learn via this framework is the language of the content being taught at grade level in various subject areas and the **context for using** this language consists of the instructional activities, texts, and assignments English learners must cope with each day in their classrooms. The **language** that students learn is exemplified in the WIDA standards framework through matrices of descriptors that represent academic tasks and requisite academic language according to grade level content (K-12) across 5 proficiency levels. The descriptors form the basis for developing instruction in academic English and assessments to document language learning. By illustrating how students can engage in classroom activities using academic language at not only high but also beginning levels of language proficiency, the descriptors model how all English learners, no matter their proficiency level, can engage in grade level content, interpreting academic content and then showing their learning through language. This early access to content learning is critical for beginning students who cannot afford to wait until they have developed intermediate (B1) or higher levels of general English proficiency before embarking on subject area learning. (For additional information about this project, go to WIDA, 2012)

Example #3: English for Teaching

As English language programs are increasingly incorporated into the mandated curriculum of public sector education systems around the world, Ministries of Education are placing additional demands on English language teachers. They are expected not only to carry out day-to-day teaching activities that will help their students develop English language skills but to do so in English. Some Ministries have approached the challenge of changing the language of instruction by providing general proficiency classes. Unfortunately, little evidence has emerged that mandating English instruction in English or providing general English classes is having much measureable effect on the language being used in the English classroom. The English for Teaching project has taken a different approach by building on what teachers already know about teaching and then supporting them in learning relevant language to carry out those teaching tasks. The project created a curriculum whose **content** is centered on the pedagogical activities teachers enact each day in the language classroom. Teachers learn pedagogical **language**—in English—they would use to manage the classroom, understand and communicate lesson content, and assess students and provide feedback. The **context for using** this language is the language classroom itself, as represented in the interactions between teachers and students as well as the materials in the national curriculum. It's interesting to note that teachers are teaching lessons in general proficiency by using English for teaching. (For additional information about this model, see Freeman et al, 2015).

Online comments and discussion at the TESOL Summit in Athens support the notion that we need a more complex and dynamic view of language competence that can support the varied needs and contexts of today's diverse learners, particularly in practical applications such in the design of curricula, materials, and assessments.

Several themes emerged:

- Learners can benefit from changes in the design of program curricula and materials to reflect realistic language use models and goals. Participants shared several examples of the need for innovation. In one example, related to the mismatch of the content of learning materials to student needs, a program for illiterate adult immigrants was based on teaching resume and job application genres to prepare students for jobs that didn't exist. In another example, related to the contexts of language use models, a participant described national coursebooks that modeled learning activities on interactions primarily among native speakers, in Anglophone settings, and using native speaker accents rather than representing successful interactions among non-native bilingual users of English.

  Defining learner need, however, may not necessarily imply moving away from generalized proficiency or idealized notions of language competence. As another participant noted, the native speaker norm remains the learning target for many learners around the world, in particular those who must sit for assessments that certify competence with reference to native speaker norms, or who wish to enter prestigious universities requiring internationally recognized assessments such as the TOEFL or IELTS or to get jobs in multi-national companies. Such comments reiterate the necessity to focus on learner needs in context, both short- and long-term ones, in order to set appropriate goals.

  As another participant pointed out, it is becoming increasingly clear that our 20th century approach to teaching all students in all classrooms in the same way so that everyone is doing the same thing and following the same curriculum is "doomed." Learning programs based on learners' needs and circumstances must be more congruent with 21st century language use demands.

- The context for learning can influence choices in program design. As one participant pointed out, there are fundamental differences between the environment of learning in the classroom and language learning and use beyond the classroom. Negotiating these differences can be challenging for students as well as their teachers.

- A global society does not require good English; it requires good communication skills. The translanguaging nature of language use in many global contexts suggests that English alone may not be the most desirable model of language competence. For example, a participant described the language use patterns of students and faculty in a

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university setting where English is mainly used in classroom and academic activities while all other interactions among students themselves, students with staff, and among faculty take place in Arabic with some English or vice versa. In such a plurilingual setting, generic tests designed for a range of contexts worldwide cannot be sufficiently accurate or sensitive, highlighting the need for additional measures.

- Challenges to changing traditional notions of English competence permeate our field. Because of this resistance to innovation, educators may have limited options in creating change. A participant noted that decisions in publishing about the design of language materials are rarely pedagogically based; more typically, they are based upon marketing, technological or financial considerations.

  Resistance to change may also come from more senior teachers, parents, and adult students who have fixed ideas about what should constitute the model of English competence, preferring that instruction emphasize grammar and prescriptive rules and achievement be referenced to native speaker competence. How to deal with such resistance is an ongoing issue.

Recommendations

As policy makers, influencers, educators, we need to diversify our thinking to explore additional ways of defining English competence in order to create educational policies and language programs that will enable our students to participate in the 21st century. Following are recommendations that emerge from the descriptions and comments presented above.

1. Our teaching standards and professional development programs need to acknowledge the importance and relevance of a more flexible view of language competence as the basis for designing teaching and learning programs and tools.
2. Contextualized models of English, such as English for Special Purposes or Academic English, should be acknowledged as co-equivalent to general proficiency rather than as specialized (or marginalized) descriptions of language use.
3. Additional research is needed to describe these additional models of competence in various contexts.
4. We need to acknowledge alternate language development frameworks based on models of context and content relevant language use such as the WIDA Framework in addition to the CEFR and ACTFL proficiency guidelines as useful and relevant tools for describing language development.
5. We need to acknowledge that C2 on the CEFR may not be the ultimate learning aim for all learners. We need more research on how to identify relevant language level goals that are context relevant.
6. We need assessments that reflect 21st century models of English competence based on relevant content and context use.
7. We need to affirm that English as a lingua franca belongs to all users rather than privileging one specific variety.

8. We need to acknowledge that content, in addition to language, may often play an important role in language classrooms, both as a means and as an end for learning.
9. We need to support teacher educators in helping teachers develop skills in adapting materials to learners' needs.
10. We need approaches and tools to work with policy makers to help them understand these emerging ideas about English language competence.

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