

Communicative competence, language proficiency and the CEFR

Extract 1

“Language proficiency” refers to a learner’s ability to mobilise the language in order to carry out language tasks; the term “communicative competence” is used both rigorously in ways that differ little from language proficiency and loosely to mean the ability to communicate. The important distinction between proficiency and communicative competence in its loose sense is illustrated by Sollenberger:

The person’s so-called language proficiency, while it may have been quite accurate in technical skill terms, did not mean effectiveness in communication. In some cases, it may have enabled the person to misrepresent or foul up more effectively... I’m sure we all know people who talk nonsense fluently. On the other hand, I know people who butcher the language, whose accents are atrocious and whose vocabularies are limited. For these reasons we give them a low proficiency rating. Yet, for some reason, some of them are effective communicators.

In this loose sense, communicative competence is a desirable target for language teaching but poses immense problems for language testing. The ability to communicate is clearly a legitimate interest of language teachers and much language teaching is aimed at providing the linguistic knowledge and skills that contribute to this ability. However, the ability to communicate entails much more than linguistic competence (knowledge of the formal systems that underlie a language) and language proficiency (the ability to use linguistic and other competences in order to carry out language tasks) and includes personality factors such as introversion and extroversion, intelligence, the ability to organise and present ideas logically and comprehensibly, experience, education, social norms, and the willingness of the interlocutor to accommodate a learner’s nonstandard language forms. Many of these variables are beyond a learner’s control; indeed, some go well beyond language, and it is for these reasons that communicative competence in this loose sense is not a legitimate target for language testing. In fact, it is unlikely that a valid and reliable test of communicative competence in the sense of the ability to communicate is possible.

Language proficiency, by contrast, is a desirable target for language teaching and for language testing". (Ingram & Elaine Wylie, 1992, p. 32).

Extract 2

"The relevance of a theory of communicative competence to language testing is obvious. Language tests involve measuring a subject's knowledge of, and proficiency in, the use of a language. A theory of communicative competence is a theory of the nature of such knowledge and proficiency. One cannot develop sound language tests without a method of defining what it means to know a language, for until you have decided what you are measuring, you cannot claim to have measured it: fundamental to the preparation of valid tests of language proficiency is a theoretical question: What does it mean to know a language?" (Spolsky et al., 1989, p. 140).