Learner Language and Language Learning

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Chapter ten: Communicative competence

Communicative competence has tended to be something of a vogue term in language teaching circles in recent years, with all the hazards that new fashions involve. The term has often been used without clear statements of what is covered or excluded by it. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify what is essential to the concept "communicative competence", partly by pulling together some of the many threads from earlier chapters, partly by introducing three new dimensions. One of these, the question of what impression different types of interlanguage make on native speakers, is of general relevance to communicative competence both in and out of school. A second dimension, which covers the relationship between learners' general cognitive and social development and their language proficiency, is of particular relevance to foreign language teaching in schools, as is the final dimension, learners' metacommunicative awareness.

10.1 The components of communicative competence

Historically the term communicative competence evolved as a result of a shift of emphasis among theorists in linguistics, a move away from the rules of language form, traditionally associated with grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, towards an emphasis on the ability to use language.[1] The essential components are the ones that we have presented in earlier chapters in the book. Provisionally we can state that communicative competence consists of the following:

	Components
Communicative competence	phonology/orthography grammar lexis pragmatics discourse communication strategies fluency

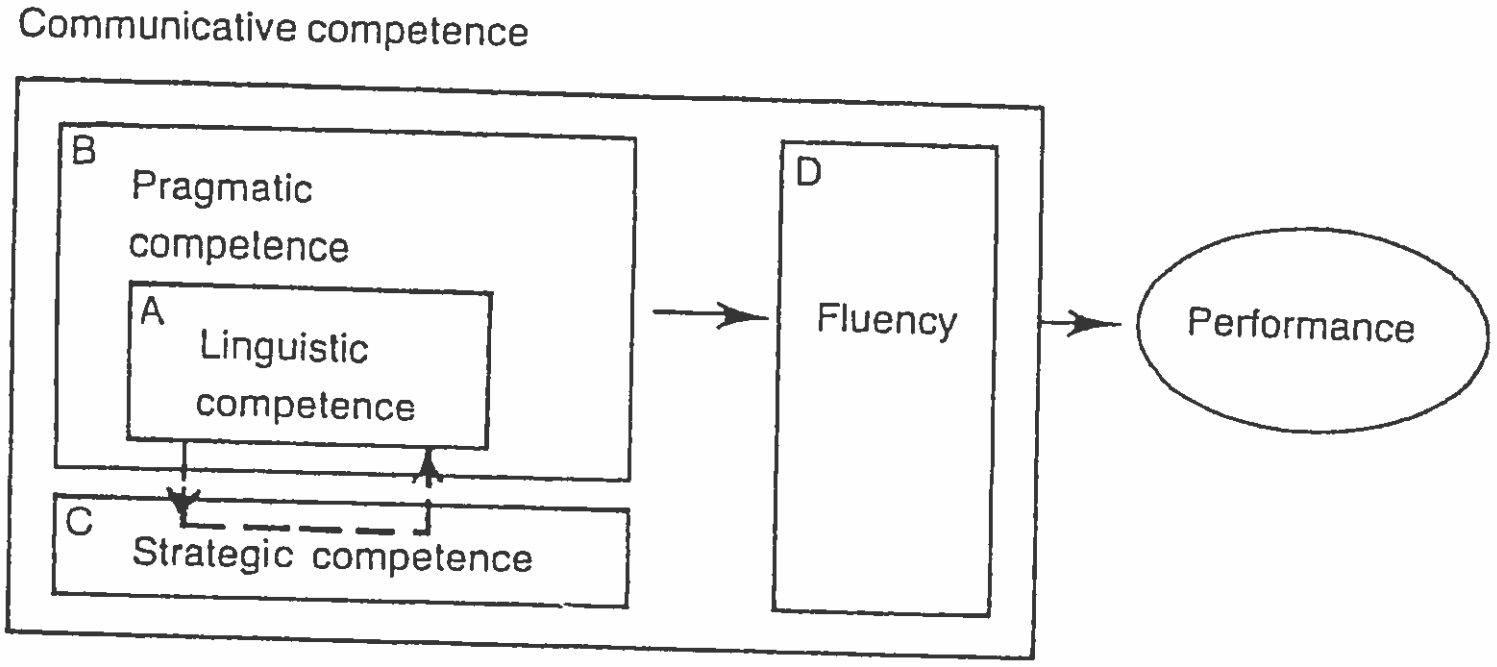


Fig. 13: Components of communicative competence
(the letters refer to the text above)

Before we exemplify this by discussing the relative importance of the various components in two hypothetical communicative events, a few general points concerning communicative competence need to be made.

The fact that linguistic competence is an essential part of pragmatic competence does not imply that learners first have to master all

are familiarised with English sounds, with concepts and words. All these are experienced directly, without the mediation of the mother tongue, as the following imports into Danish testify: *allright, burger, cornflakes, cowboy(bukser), babysitter, pub, soft ice, world cup,* etc.

Some of the input can be interpreted directly by means of the knowledge the learner already has of the foreign language (the learner's 'interlanguage' knowledge, see chapter 17). This means that the psycholinguistic rules (cf chapter 6) which a native speaker has used in order to produce the language are matched by rules in the learner's IL system. The learner can also interpret input by means of inferencing strategies (see chapter 8), by making qualified guesses as to the meaning of input ('top-down processing'). The result may be total or partial comprehension, or there may be a residue of input which is incomprehensible.

In figure 14, (a) and (b) cover COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT, input which the learner can interpret either by means of a direct application of existing IL knowledge or by the activation of inferencing procedures. (c) covers incomprehensible input.

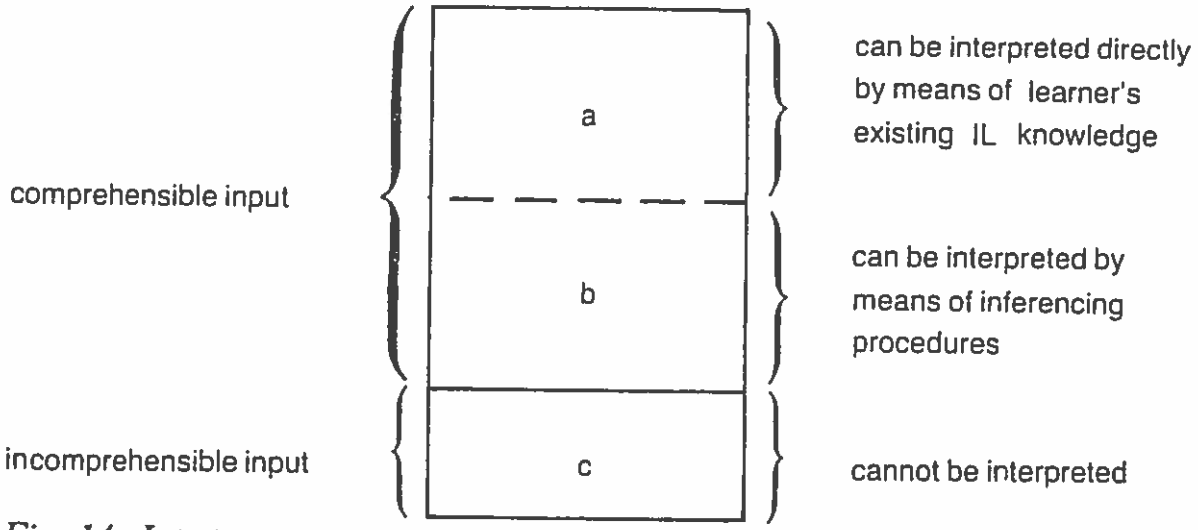


Fig. 14: Input

The concept of comprehensible input applies to processes of *communication.* We can now take a step into *learning* and say that it is a prerequisite for learning new rules, words, etc., both that input is comprehensible and that input goes beyond what can be directly interpreted by means of the learner's existing IL knowledge.[2] We have all had the experience of listening to a foreign language we do not know and which we can make no sense of whatsoever. Clearly, no new

11.4 A model of foreign language learning

The following figure summarises the main points made so far about foreign language learning seen as a process of hypothesis formation and testing.

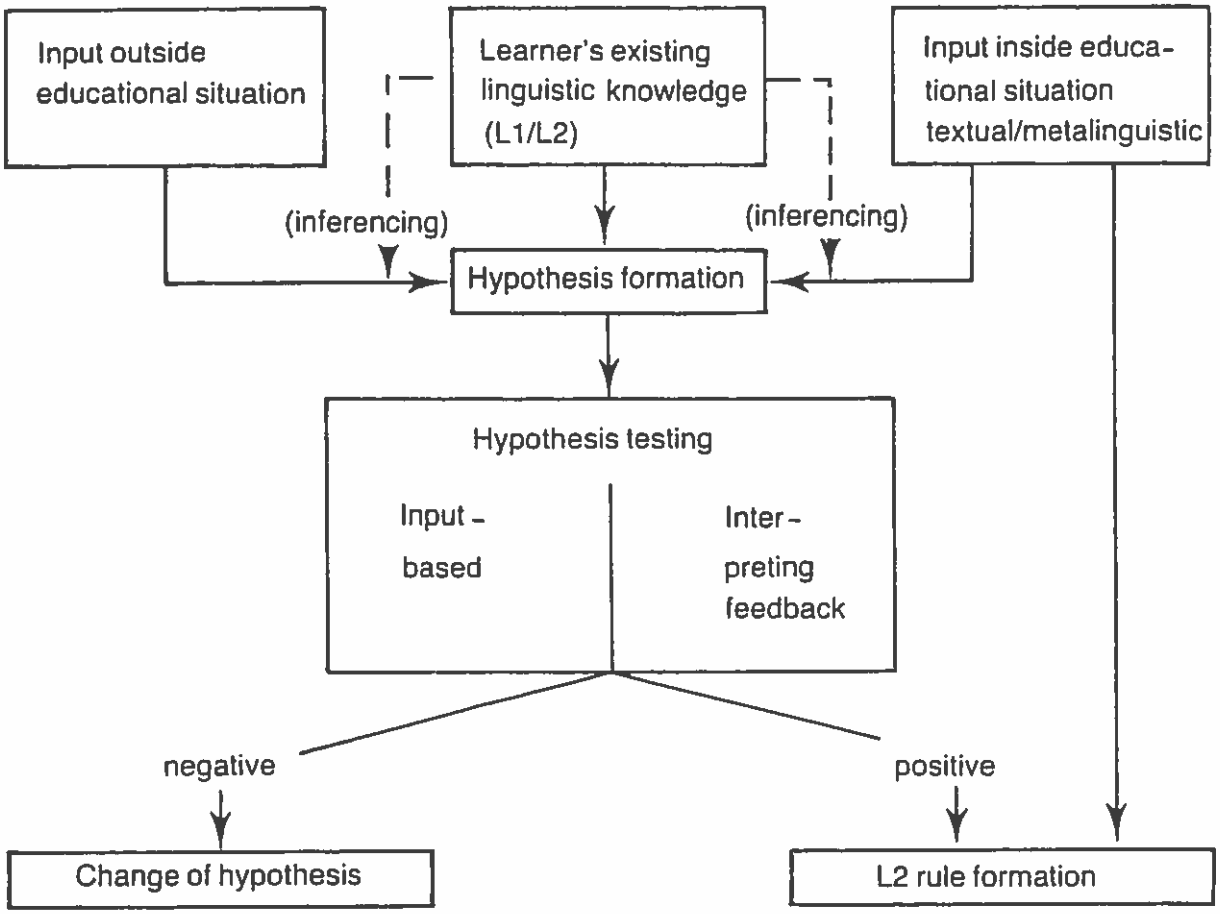
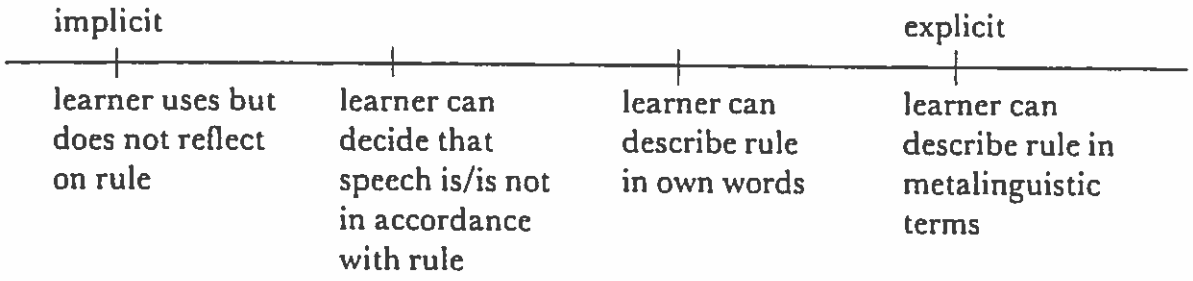


Fig. 15: Foreign language learning seen as a process of hypothesis formation and testing

In the figure we have added one process to those covered already, the one represented by the arrow that combines "Input inside educational situation" with "L2 rule formation". This is to allow for the possibility of "direct teaching". The teacher or the teaching materials introduce a new target language rule or item, eg a word, which the learners then practise. Clear-cut instances of this are to be found in connection with vocabulary teaching, where the teacher may decide to introduce words not encountered in texts (for instance words belonging to a relevant semantic field). As regards grammar, teachers generally prefer to let learners meet sentences exempli-

mulated in everyday language ("we use *små* in Danish if we talk about more than one") or occur in situations where the individual can decide that something is *not* correct, without being able to give reasons. Rather than operate with a dichotomy between explicit and implicit knowledge, we therefore propose the following continuum as a more satisfactory way of characterising types of linguistic knowledge in terms of consciousness:



One might argue that there is no difference between the two leftmost categories, that somebody who can use a linguistic rule can also decide whether something is right or wrong. The reason why there is no such one-to-one relationship between actual language use and acceptability judgments is that awareness of linguistic norms may interfere with the individual's ability to reflect on her own verbal behaviour. It is well-known that people sometimes systematically use a linguistic rule which they would, if asked directly, categorically claim to be unacceptable and not believe that they themselves use.[6]

There are two important questions to raise in connection with a discussion of types of linguistic knowledge:

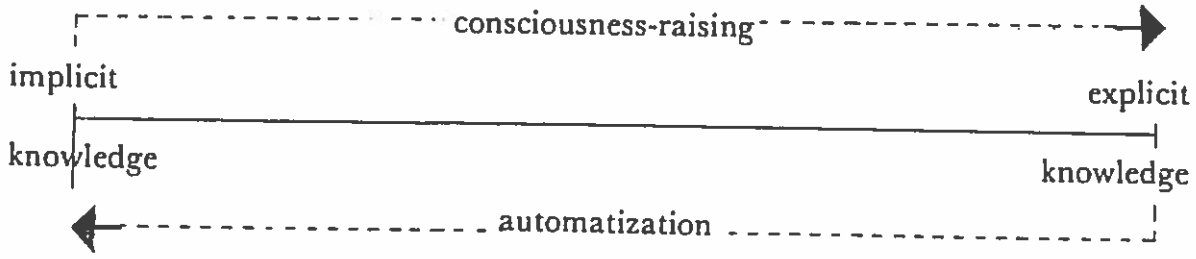
(1) How much of the continuum can a certain rule (more precisely, a psycholinguistic rule) occupy? In other words, is it possible for rules to be both maximally implicit and explicit at the same time? Or do some types of linguistic knowledge rule out the presence of other types?
(2) Supposing that learning sets in at *one* point on the continuum, what are the possibilities for the learner to extend this knowledge into other areas of the continuum?

Opinions differ considerably among researchers on these questions. One view is that implicit knowledge is of a completely different type from metalinguistic knowledge: implicit knowledge has to be 'acquired', explicit knowledge has to be 'learnt'. They may coexist,

but serve very different functions in communication: implicit linguistic knowledge is at the basis of speech reception and production, whereas explicit linguistic knowledge is used for monitoring these processes. This is the view most categorically advocated by the American researcher Stephen Krashen (see eg Krashen 1982).

A different view is that there is nothing in principle that prevents a certain rule from being represented both at the extreme implicit and at the extreme explicit ends of the continuum simultaneously: learning can proceed either from implicit knowledge to more explicit knowledge, or in the opposite direction. The process of developing more consciousness about implicit knowledge is part of the general process of CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING. A process in the opposite direction – the learner gradually developing an ability to use a certain rule for productive and receptive purposes without being aware of this – is usually referred to as an AUTOMATIZATION process.

We can illustrate the processes of consciousness-raising and automatization, relative to foreign language learning, in the following way:



The view we have just described is held by many European researchers and is largely in accordance with Soviet psycholinguistic theory.[7] We consider both automatization and consciousness-raising important elements in a comprehensive model of foreign language learning, in addition to the processes already discussed (hypothesis formation and testing, imitation).

11.6 Foreign language learning related to classroom activities

We finish off this chapter by relating the process of foreign language learning to three classroom activities, a translation exercise, teacher-guided discussion of a literary text, and role play. These are activities which illustrate the different processes at work.