

# Competence and performance in learning and teaching: theories and practices

David Newby

University of Graz

david.newby@uni-graz.at

**Abstract:** For the past forty years the nature of linguistic competence has been at the centre of discussions among linguists, both theoretical and applied. This paper examines the different ways in which both competence and performance have been defined by linguists and considers how differing interpretations of these concepts have influenced foreign language learning and teaching. Special consideration is given to the role of two Council of Europe publications, the *Common European Framework of Reference* and the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*.

**Key words:** communicative competence, performance, communicative event, human cognition, schematic constructs, discourse

## 1. Introduction

The publication of Chomsky's *Aspects of the theory of syntax* in 1965 led to a fundamental change concerning the goals of linguistic analysis. The shift of emphasis – in theory at least - from language structures to the human beings who use language caused the focus of analysis to fall on the nature of speakers' linguistic competence which steered the generation of utterances.

As far as language teaching is concerned, from the late 1970s onwards, in the early days of the communicative approach, 'communicative competence' became the slogan under which various methodological practices which sought to link pedagogy with language use in the real world were united. More recently, the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)* (Council of Europe 2001) extended the purely language-based scope of competences to include "General competences," which are "those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities" (CEFR: 9), thus embedding language within human cognition in general and linking it to human behaviour.

In both linguistics and language teaching, definitions of competence have shown a continual development from that first proposed by Chomsky. Underlying current interpretations of the term three general hypotheses can be perceived. The first is the widespread acceptance that language is essentially a *cognitive* phenomenon and that the use of the linguistic code of a language (performance) is steered by tacit rule-based knowledge stored in the minds of speakers (competence). This view includes both a Chomskyan modular (language-specific) view of competence and those theories that can be grouped under the heading of 'Cognitive Linguistics<sup>1</sup>;' which see language and cognition in general as an integrated whole sharing similar systems of perception and categorisation.

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<sup>1</sup> I shall use capitals to refer to this school of linguistics to distinguish it from 'cognitive' used as a generic adjective relating to human cognition in general.

The second is the recognition that the subject of linguistic description is not only the mental processes that steer language but the *speech community* and *culture* in which a particular variety of language is used.

The third is the view that language analysis must include not only the systems and rules which steer the generation of utterances, but the interactional processes by which *human discourse* arises and is maintained; that is to say language use.

## 2. Language and competence: linguistic reality

In the 1960s and 70s Chomsky's description of the terms competence and performance triggered an intensive debate among linguists, later to be picked up by applied linguists. Theoretical bones of contention lay within two separate but interconnected areas:

- a) the nature of linguistic competence
- b) the relationship between competence and performance and their respective roles in linguistic analysis and description.

Before considering the different views, however, it should be stressed that Chomsky's important theoretical standpoint, that it is the goal of linguistics to describe a speaker's "*mental reality* underlying actual behaviour" (1965: 4), is one that is shared by all the theories of competence referred to in the following. This general cognitive view of language can also be found in the *Common European Framework of Reference*.

As is well documented, the starting point of the competence-performance debate was Chomsky's famous statement: "We thus make a fundamental distinction between competence (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations)" (ibid.: 3). He further states that "Observed use of language (...) cannot constitute the actual subject matter of linguistics, if this is to be a serious discipline" (ibid.: 4). It is clear, therefore, that in his view, it is competence that is to be at the centre of linguistic attention.

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (ibid.: 3)

Given Chomsky's goal of describing systematically the grammar of a language, this statement is perhaps not unreasonable. However, terms such as "homogeneous speech-community", "grammatically irrelevant conditions" were soon to produce a backlash among those whose descriptive goals lay in a different sphere.

In his famous paper 'On Communicative Competence', Del Hymes criticised Chomsky's view from several directions, the first being sociological: "It is, if I may say so, rather a Garden of Eden view. (...) The controlling image is of an abstract, isolated mechanism, not, except incidentally, a person in a social world" (1972: 272). The view of language based solely on grammatical competence also came under attack from Michael Halliday. Describing language as a "social fact" and a "social reality", he pointed out that "By their everyday acts of meaning people act out the social structure, affirming their own statuses and roles and establishing and transmitting the shared systems of value and of knowledge" (Halliday, 1978: 2). What is at issue for both Hymes and Halliday is not necessarily the nature of a Chomskyan view of competence but its limited scope.

We have to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner (Hymes 1972: 277-278).

I said earlier that for Chomsky competence represents what he calls “*mental reality* underlying actual behaviour” (1965: 4). It could be said that for Hymes, communicative competence represents *social reality* underlying actual behaviour. Various theories have focused on this aspect of language; for example, those of Leech (1983) and Levinson (1983) have attempted to explain phenomena such as politeness, an important sociological aspect of communication.

The second criticism of Chomsky’s view of competence concerned the functional dimension of language. For linguists and philosophers such as Halliday (passim), Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), the very basis of language is of a functional nature. This is reflected in the title of Austin’s famous book *How to do things with words*. Halliday states this view quite bluntly: “*Can mean* is a ‘realization of *can do*’ (1978: 39). Of the various functional theories proposed, it was Searle’s concept of ‘illocutionary act’ (1969: 23-24) which was to have the most influence on language teaching: it later became common for ‘communicative’ textbooks to define teaching objectives in terms of ‘speech functions’. Indeed, in the early days of communicative teaching it was not uncommon to hear the term ‘notional-functional approach’ being used synonymously for communicative language teaching.

The third criticism of Chomsky was levelled at his view that the sentence is the primary unit of linguistic analysis. Halliday put forward the counterclaim that “Language does not consist of sentences; it consists of text or discourse– the exchange of meanings in interpersonal contexts of one kind or another” (1978: 2). A discourse perspective of competence focuses on the ongoing choices that speakers make while speaking or writing transmit, adapt and clarify a message, to make language use more efficient, to show the relevance of one information chunk to another etc. Categories such as information structure, dialogue structure, co-text, ellipsis, substitution, reference, deixis and many more reflect the view that language systems operate not only at utterance level but at discourse level too. Also, the maxims arising from Grice’s (1975) “co-operative principle,” which attempts to explain in a systematic way how speakers infer and interpret indirect speech acts, sarcasm, humour etc., are an important aspect of a discourse approach.

Various aspects of a discourse approach were to influence foreign language teaching: for example, the term ‘utterance’ tended to replace ‘sentence’, recognising that in both formal and functional terms people do not always speak in grammatical sentences. Also, the focus of attention expanded beyond single utterances to include stretches of talk or writing. In his ground-breaking book *Teaching Language as Communication*, which provided an important link between linguistics and language teaching, Widdowson devoted a chapter to discourse categories such ‘coherence,’ ‘cohesion,’ propositional development (1978: 22ff.), which subsequently came to occupy an important place in the repertoire of language teachers.

It is worth mentioning that whilst the focus of communicative language teaching tends to be on pragmatic and discourse meaning, rather than on semantic meaning, for linguists – including Hymes - these types of meaning are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Both in language teaching and in applied linguistics an unfortunate dichotomy is often promulgated between grammatical meaning and pragmatic and discourse meaning. This is seen in the quite unjustifiable division between ‘form-focussed’ and ‘meaning-based’ teaching often found in applied linguistic research (see, for example, Spada 1997: 73). Hymes’ famous statement “There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless” (1972: 278) is often wrongly interpreted by methodologists as a rejection of grammar. Hymes goes on to say “a

normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate” (ibid). Similarly, whilst Searle is best known for the category of ‘illocutionary act,’ an intrinsic part of his speech act theory is what he terms ‘propositional acts,’ which he describes as “referring and predicating” (1969: 23). Halliday’s functionally oriented theories include ‘ideational’ meaning as a core category. All of these categories point to the importance of grammar and lexis in conveying meaning.

### 3. Competence beyond language: non-linguistic reality

For Chomsky, the premise that linguistic reality reflects a specific language module in a speaker’s brain and the complementary hypothesis of the existence of a universal grammar requires linguists to draw a dividing line between linguistic reality and general cognitive, non-linguistic aspects of mental reality. This separation has been the subject of strong criticism from linguists who see language and cognition as an interdependent whole and whose theories can be grouped together under the general term of Cognitive Linguistics (for example, Langacker 1987, 1991; Heine 1997; Tomasello 2003; Jackendoff 1983, 2002). In their book on Cognitive Linguistics Croft and Cruse (2004: 1) list three hypotheses which guide this approach:

- language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty
- grammar is conceptualization
- knowledge of language emerges from language use

It follows from the first hypothesis that if language is not separate from, but embedded within, general aspects of human cognition, then linguists must go beyond linguistic reality in order to explain how language is stored in the brain and used in actual contexts.

A cognitive view of language will also have an important impact on theories of language acquisition since linguists will seek to explain not only how language input is processed and categorised but how infants process and categorise their experience and perceptions of the world in general. What is innate in a child at birth is not only what Chomsky termed a “language acquisition device” but an *experience acquisition device*. As far as foreign language learning is concerned, the growing interest in cognitive hypotheses has, in recent years, caused theories of second language acquisition to move away from a Chomskyan universal grammar view (for example, Krashen 1981; Cook 1991) towards a general cognitive view (for example, Johnson 1996; Skehan 1998). The following three premises of a Cognitive Approach are relevant to the present discussions:

- “The processes which steer foreign language learning are considerably different from those which underlie first language acquisition” (Newby 2003: 407).
- “The L2 learner has considerably greater cognitive abilities and schematic knowledge than the first language learner” (Skehan 1998: 75).
- “Learning is an active and dynamic process in which individuals make use of a variety of information and strategic modes of processing” (O’Malley and Chamot 1990: 217).

One category that has attracted considerable attention in Cognitive Linguistics and increasingly in foreign language learning and teaching is the role and nature of what is usually referred to as schematic knowledge. Reflecting a constructivist view of language, I shall refer to this as *schematic constructs*. These constructs, or mental representation of knowledge, interact with *systemic knowledge* of a language to facilitate the processing, interpretation and comprehension of language. Schematic

constructs have, on the one hand, a personal element to them: human beings interpret one and the same event or one and the same utterance in differing ways. However, schematic knowledge is also to a considerable extent *conventional* in that speakers of a speech community will share a common mode of perceiving an event or utterance.

Schematic constructs take different forms, ranging from categories which need little theoretical explanation such as factual knowledge or remembrance of past experiences, largely of a declarative nature, which may or may not be shared by interlocutors, to abstract perceptual categories, such as mental generalisations about how human experience is structured, shortly to be described.

The exchange of messages between people requires the constant application of both systemic (language code) and schematic knowledge structures. It should be added that there is some disagreement concerning schematic categorisation, terms and definitions of schematic knowledge among linguists. The following show my own usage of categories and terms:

- *Schemata*: a set of ideas, associations, expectations which an individual speaker or listener may have in connection with a concept, an object, person, place, action, event etc.
- *Scenario*: a speaker's internal mental representation of a state of affairs, event etc. in the external world.
- *Frame*: a commonly occurring, generalisable scenario with which a speaker and a hearer are familiar; a 'remembered framework' (see Minsky 1975, cited in Brown and Yule 1983: 238); lexical, grammatical and pragmatic meaning are to a certain extent predictable in a specific scenario.
- *Script*: a frame that extends beyond single utterances; a 'remembered framework of coherent chains of utterance forms, speech functions, topics etc., in which specific *discourse patterns* tend to occur and are generalisable (see Schank and Abelson 1977 cited in Brown and Yule 1983: 241; Hoey 1991). Adjacency pairs (for example, 'thank you' – 'you're welcome') can be defined as highly predictable, prototypical scripts.

Conventionalised schemata play an important role in communication and in the encoding, decoding and interpretation of utterances, yet their importance in language teaching is not generally recognised. Exceptions to this are the receptive skills of reading and listening: methodologists often stress the importance of activating learners' schematic knowledge, for example in pre-reading tasks.

Various types of schematic knowledge comprise what might be termed a speaker's *schematic competence*, a competence which should be incorporated in any model which aims at describing general competence. In discussions of the CEFR, its references to schemata and their role in language processing and use, are seldom quoted, though, as we shall see, schematic knowledge is given a degree of prominence. To cite one example: "The availability of routinised schematic knowledge frees the learner to deal with content and, in the case of interaction and spontaneous production activities, to concentrate on more accurate use of less well established forms" (p.162).

As far as general competences are concerned, text books on FL methodology tend to focus on what might broadly be called personality factors. One aspect of Hymes' theories which is seldom quoted by applied linguists is his extension of the notion of competence not only in a sociological direction but also to incorporate aspects which the CEFR describes as "selfhood factors" (p.105), as the following quotation shows:

This competence, moreover, is integral with attitudes, values, and motivations concerning language, its features and users, and integral with competence for, and attitudes toward, the interrelation of language with the other code of communicative conduct. (Hymes 1972: 278)

It is interesting to note that in the category “existential competence” of the CEFR the first three sub-categories bear the headings “attitudes, values, and motivations” (CEFR: 105); in other words, exactly the same terms as those used by Hymes.

#### 4. The nature of performance

Whilst the focus of attention of both linguists and applied linguists has been on competence, the nature and role of performance has also been the subject of debate. As stated above, Chomsky dismissed performance as an imperfect manifestation of competence and not worthy of being incorporated into a “serious discipline”. For Hymes, performance is of interest since it is the “product of social interaction” (1972: 271). In order to describe performance, however, it is necessary to provide some kind of theoretical framework in which it can be embedded.

In attempting to describe performance Hymes recognises the following ambiguity in the use of the term:

When one speaks of performance, then, does one mean the behavioral data of speech? or all that underlies speech beyond the grammatical? or both? (...) The difficulty can be put in terms of the two contrasts that usage manifests:

1. (underlying) competence v. (actual) performance;
2. (underlying) grammatical competence v. (underlying) models/rules of performance (1972: 281).

It seems to me, however, that whilst Hymes rightly identifies different senses of the term, his statements are somewhat ambiguous. Sense 2 points to ‘models of performance’ but surely this should be contrasted not only with grammatical but with communicative competence too.

In his definition, Halliday (1978: 38) makes the performance element more explicit by speaking of a “behavioural potential”. “When I say *can do*, I am specifically referring to the behaviour potential as a semiotic which can be encoded in language, or of course in other things too.” It is interesting that he uses the phrase “can do”, heralding a formulation which has now become widespread across Europe since the publication of the CEFR.

However, whilst introducing a behavioural element, it could be argued that reference to ‘potential’ means that this definition still lies in the area of communicative competence. A further statement by Hymes does come closer to describing performance: “It [performance] takes into account the interaction between competence (knowledge, ability for use), the competence of others, and the cybernetic and emergent properties of events themselves” (1978: 283).

The key words here are “interaction” and “cybernetic”. These suggest that performance is more than a “behavioural potential”; it is the actual using of language. An analysis of the various definitions and descriptions of performance show the following three usages:

- a) the “behavioural potential” to perform (knowledge-based grammatical competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, etc.)
- b) the act of performing
- c) the product of performance (output)

In order to disambiguate these uses I shall use the following terms: a) competence, meaning both knowledge and behaviour potential; b) performance c) output.

### 5. Speech events

I said earlier that both Hymes and Halliday see language not only as what Chomsky terms mental reality but also as social reality. It follows from this that in order to describe this social reality, it is the task of linguists not only to analyse aspects of the language code but to explain how language functions and is acquired as a communication system. Since this analysis is of both a psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic nature, it must be embedded in theories of extra-linguistic variables which steer this social reality; for example, a *theory of context*. As Widdowson says (1998: 8), “Context ... is no longer *apart* from language but *a part of it*”. Moreover, it needs to incorporate the *dynamic* aspect of language performance. To this end, Hymes proposes the concept of a “*speech event*”, which he defines as “... activities, or aspects of activities, that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech. An event may consist of a single speech act, but will often comprise several” (1986: 56). It is interesting to note that this use of ‘activities’ can be found in the same sense in the *Common European Framework of Reference*.

The importance of speech events is twofold. First, it can provide a specification of important contextual variables which ‘constrain’ the use of language. According to Hymes (1972: 26) some of these variables are:

- (1) a *code* or *codes* in terms of which the message is intelligible to
- (2) *participants*, minimally an addressor and addressee (who may be the same person), in
- (3) an *event* constituted by its transmission and characterized by
- (4) a *channel* or *channels*,
- (5) a *setting* or *context*,
- (6) a definite *form* or *shape* to the message, and
- (7) a *topic* and *comment*, i.e., that it says something about something - in other words, that the concept of message implies the array of components previously given.

This type of specification was an important factor in the sudden expansion of categories and objectives in curricula and FL textbooks which followed a communicative approach. It was a categorisation incorporated in the two important Council of Europe publications: the *Threshold Level* (van Ek 1975 and van Ek and Trim 1991) and the *Common European Framework of Reference*.

The second important implication of the speech or communicative event – I shall use the latter term so as to include both spoken and written language - is that it sees language not only in terms of communicative competence but as a process and system of use. In order to describe language it is therefore necessary not only to list competences and to specify contextual variables but to model the communication process. Such a model can be found in figure 1.

Figure 1: Model of a communicative event

Communicative ↓Competence ↓	Context: setting, channel genre, topic, key, etc.							Communicative ↓Competence ↓	
Addressor + activity	→	Perceptions	→	Notions	↘	Form	→	Message/ Outcome	Addressee + activity
	→	Purpose	→	Functions	↗				
↑ Schematic ↑ constructs	→ → → → Performance: Processes and Strategies → → → →							↑ Schematic ↑ knowledge	

This simple model attempts to stress the following aspects of communication:

- language consists of *speech events* arising from the desire or need to carry out an activity: i.e. to encode perceptions into spoken or written language for a specific purpose (addressor); or to decode perceptions (addressee);

- language is a reflection of a human being's *mental reality*, which consists, among other things, of communicative (including cultural) competence and schematic constructs;
- all language use takes place in a *context*;
- language is a *process* in which perceptions of the world are encoded into language (see left-to-right arrows in figure 1);
- language is used for a *purpose* and has an *outcome*
- the act of performance requires the speaker and listener to apply various *processing* and *communication* strategies;
- language is both a *knowledge-based* and a *skill-based* phenomenon.

Two important advantages of making a communication model analysis are that, first, it makes explicit and transparent individual though interrelated *components of an act of communication*, and, second, it has the potential to provide a framework for describing not only *competence* but *performance* too. For language teaching, this means that language learning can be seen as skill development rather than merely the accumulation of knowledge; thus, whether we are setting objectives or assessing language proficiency, this can be done in terms of the dynamic use of language – i.e. performance. This is what the *CEFR* refers to as an “action-oriented” approach (p.9).

## 6. From linguistics to pedagogy

Although most of the theories referred to so far were not developed with foreign language teaching in mind, they have had, since the 1970s, a considerable effect on pedagogy. In the 1970s the Council of Europe document, the *Threshold Level* (1975/1991), provided a taxonomy of significant elements of the communication process, both linguistic and non-linguistic, such as language-functions, general and specific notions, verbal exchange patterns, language skills, sociological competence and competence strategies. Wilkins (1976) and Munby (1978) attempted to compile categories of linguistic competence based on a semantic and pragmatic, notional-functional axis, though interest in notional aspects of grammatical competence soon faded (see Newby 2000). In 1980 Canale and Swain provided a description of competence based on four categories:

1. *grammatical competence*: knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics and phonology;
2. *sociolinguistic competence*: the ability to communicate appropriately in a variety of contexts; this includes both verbal and non-verbal communication;
3. *discourse competence*: the ability to use language which goes beyond the level of the sentence; this includes aspects such as cohesion and coherence;
4. *strategic competence*: appropriate use of communication strategies to overcome or repair breakdowns in communication, due perhaps to lack of linguistic competence.

Later, Bachmann (1990: 87) provided a tree-diagram of “linguistic competence” with two nodes: “organisational competence”, subdivided into grammatical and textual competence, and “pragmatic competence”, subdivided into “illocutionary” and “sociological” competence.

These categorisations largely focus on different kinds of competence; one exception being those of “compensational strategies” (*Threshold Level*) and “strategic competence” (Canale and Swain), which refer to the aspect of performance.

The focus on communication competence had various important effects: school syllabuses often included the type of categorisation advocated by the *Threshold Level*; teaching objectives tended to be formulated as ‘notions’ and ‘functions’, rather than as grammatical forms, thus broadening the aims of language teaching beyond formally specified grammar and lexis. This in turn caused a shift of focus in learning aims from

knowledge to use; from the beginnings of the communicative approach to teaching there was considerable interest in performance aspects of language. Widdowson (1978: 3) made the important distinction between “usage” and “use”, stating that “we are generally called upon to produce instances of language *use*: we do not simply manifest the abstract system of the language, we at the same time realize it as meaningful communicative behaviour”. To explain this he refers to relevant linguistic theories: “This distinction between usage and use is related to de Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole* and Chomsky’s similar distinction between competence and performance” (ibid.: 3). He further states:

Usage, then, is one aspect of performance, that aspect of performance which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules. Use is another aspect of performance: that which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication. (3)

It was this question of “demonstrating his [sic] ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication” that was later addressed by the CEFR, which was to provide not only a comprehensive categorisation and description of competences, but a specification of language performance.

### **7. The Common European Framework of Reference**

The publication of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* in 2001 was a major milestone in foreign language learning and teaching. Its main aim is to

... describe[s] in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners’ progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis. (1)

Building on the work of the *Threshold Level* and adopting its “taxonomic nature” it addresses all aspects identified in the communication model of figure 1. In order to illustrate this and to show the coherence that exists between the descriptive categories, I shall return to the concept of a communicative event.

#### *7.1. Communicative events*

Although not defined explicitly, the term “communicative event” occurs eleven times in the CEFR. A common collocation is “participate in”, stressing the dynamic, action-oriented aspect of language which underlies the whole of the document. Various aspects of communicative events identified in figure 1 are referred to, examples being:

- the nature and role of external contexts;
- the nature and role of “mental contexts” (p.50) (schematic knowledge, intercultural perceptions (p.12), internal representations)
- the nature of communicative competence;
- the activity or language acts carried out by language users– what I earlier termed the “act of performing” and, by implication, the outcome of performance;
- processes and strategies employed by users of a language in the act of performing

In the following I shall comment on some of these categories and briefly explain how they are dealt with in the CEFR.

## 7.2. External Contexts

I have already referred to the importance of context in linguistic description, both in linguistics and language teaching. In this connection I quoted Widdowson (1998: 8): ‘Context ... is no longer *apart* from language but *a part of it*’. Like the *Threshold Level*, the CEFR provides examples of variables of “external context”: domains, instructions, persons, operations, texts are some examples. It also adds what might be termed a contextual processing category: “conditions and constraints,” which includes psychological aspects such as “time pressure,” sociological, such as “relative status of participants,” and physical, “poor lighting” (when reading) (147). This third example illustrates how the CEFR often wanders quite far into non-linguistic territory. Depending on one’s theoretical standpoint, such an example could be regarded as a rather trivial irrelevance or – my standpoint, and I assume that of the authors of the CEFR – that there is no clear dividing line between perceptions related to language and perceptions of external reality in general. And this leads to the next category.

### 7.2.1. Mental contexts

One topic that is dealt with extensively in the CEFR is that of what was earlier referred to as ‘the mental reality’ of the user of a language. On page 50 we can read a statement which can be interpreted as a basic tenet of a Cognitive Approach to language description:

The external context is filtered and interpreted through the user’s: perceptual apparatus; attention mechanisms; long-term experience, affecting memory, associations and connotations; practical classification of objects, events, etc.; linguistic categorisation. These factors influence the user’s *observation* of the context.

A further statement: “the communicative event is further determined by consideration of relevance (to the user)” points to the relevance theories outlined by, amongst others, Sperber and Wilson (1986). In an interesting section entitled “the mental context of the interlocutor(s)” (51), the “information gap” between interlocutors is explained not only in terms of different knowledge but of different “internal representations”. Thus, communication is described not only on a linguistic level but on a schematic one. Various other important terms from cognitive psychology and Cognitive Linguistics are given extensive coverage by the CEFR. Among these, some of which I referred to in an earlier section, we can find reference to:

- Schemata “relevant schemata are used to build up a representation of the meaning being expressed and a hypothesis as to the communicative intention behind it”;
- Framing “selecting mental set, activating schemata, setting up expectations”;
- Hypothesis testing: “matching cues to schemata”;
- Inferring (Grice is one of the few theorists to be mentioned explicitly in the CEFR) (72).

Also categories from a cognitive view of discourse can be found. In the section on “Interaction Strategies” (84) reference is made to what I earlier termed “scripts,” described in the CEFR as “interaction schemata”, “verbal exchange patterns” and “praxeograms - a diagram representing the structure of a communicative interaction.”

As stated earlier, this cognitive aspect is one of the least-known elements of the CEFR. One reason for this is, no doubt, that these categories are hardly represented in the ‘illustrative scales’ which contain explicit descriptors. It seems, regrettably, to be the case that for many teachers and teacher trainers a knowledge of the CEFR does not extend beyond the competence descriptors and their levels.

### 7.2.2. Communicative competence

The CEFR defines competences as “the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions” (9). By including skills, this definition goes beyond mere knowledge and reflects the “behaviour potential” of Halliday, which was discussed earlier. “Communicative language competences” are described in the following sub-categories:

Table 2: Communicative language competence in the CEFR

Communicative language competence (CEFR 2.1.2, p.13)	
Linguistic competences: (subdivided into)	‘lexical, phonological, syntactic knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as system’ (13).
Lexical competence (CEFR 5.2.1.1)	‘knowledge of, and ability to use, the vocabulary of a language, consists of lexical elements and grammatical elements’ (110)
Grammatical competence (CEFR 5.2.1.2)	‘knowledge of, and ability to use, the grammatical resources of a language’ (112)
Phonological competence (CEFR 5.2.1.4)	‘a knowledge of, and skill in the perception and production of: the sound-units ( <i>phonemes</i> ) of the language and their realisation in particular contexts ( <i>allophones</i> ), etc. (116)
Orthographic competence (CEFR 5.2.1.5)	‘a knowledge of and skill in the perception and production of the symbols of which written texts are composed’ (117)
Sociolinguistic competences	‘refer to the sociocultural conditions of language use’ (...) ‘rules of politeness, norms governing behaviour between generations, sexes, classes and social groups, linguistic codification of certain fundamental rituals in the functioning of a community’ (13)
Pragmatic competences: (subdivided into)	
Functional competences, (p.123)	‘relating to the communicative function of utterances’ (production of language functions, speech acts)
Discourse competences	‘the mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence, the identification of text types and forms’ (13) ‘relating to the organising and structuring of texts’ (...) ‘drawing on scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges’ (123).

A further category, “semantic competence” which “deals with the learner’s awareness and control of the organisation of meaning” (115) relates to both lexis and grammar.

These categories are reminiscent of those of Canale and Swain (1980); however, the more general term “linguistic competences” replaces their “grammatical competences”, the latter reflecting Chomsky’s use of the term to refer to what is rule governed and systematic. This frees up the label “grammatical” to refer to meaning and relations expressed through grammatical morphemes and syntax.

### 7.3. Competences and education

“The Council promotes policies which strengthen linguistic diversity and language rights, deepen mutual understanding, consolidate democratic citizenship and sustain social cohesion” (Internet 1) [14.11.09]).

In keeping with the aims of the Council of Europe expressed above, the scope of competences described in the CEFR extends beyond the merely cognitive, linguistic and functional to include general competences which are based on the potential of a school language learning environment to provide a framework in which personal, social and culture competences can be enhanced. It thus has an ideological, educational dimension that is not addressed by linguists who seek to define competences from a purely mentalist or sociological perspective. This dimension is summed up in a question posed

by the CEFR (44): “How can language learning best contribute to their personal and cultural development as responsible citizens in a pluralist democratic society?”

Two areas of competences fall into this educational category. The first is the category “ability to learn” or “savoir apprendre”, which is defined as “is the ability to observe and participate in new experiences and to incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge, modifying the latter where necessary” (106). The second is that part of “existential competence” which deals with personal aspects such as “values, e.g. ethical and moral” (105).

It should be stressed that this category is not separate from those previously described above but an extension of specific competences in an educational direction. The following chart shows some of the competences that fall into this educational category.

Table 3: General language competence in the CEFR (examples)

Sociocultural knowledge (CEFR, 5.1.1.2)	‘knowledge of the society and culture of the community or communities in which a language is spoken’ (102)
Intercultural awareness (CEFR 5.1.1.3)	‘knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the “world of origin” and the “world of the target community” produce an intercultural awareness. (103)
Intercultural skills and know-how (CEFR 5.1.2.2)	‘- the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other; - cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures’ (104)
‘Existential’ competence (CEFR 5.1.3)	‘The development of an ‘intercultural personality’ involving both attitudes and awareness is seen by many as an important educational goal in its own right.’ (106)
Ability to learn (CEFR 5.1.4)	‘the ability to observe and participate in new experiences and to incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge, modifying the latter where necessary. Language learning abilities are developed in the course of the experience of learning. They enable the learner to deal more effectively and independently with new language learning challenges, to see what options exist and to make better use of opportunities.’ (106)

#### 7.4. Processes and strategies

Language descriptions based on “a communicative event” view of language must include not only underlying competences and the output of language activities but also the act of performing these activities. The CEFR distinguishes two categories that refer to the encoding (and decoding) of language: strategies and processes, defined as follows:

*Language processes* refer to the chain of events, neurological and physiological, involved in the production and reception of speech and writing. A *strategy* is any organised, purposeful and regulated line of action chosen by an individual to carry out a task which he or she sets for himself or herself or with which he or she is confronted (10).

It could be stated that processes are an inherent part of human cognition and behaviour whereas strategies are - often conscious - attempts by users and learners of language to optimise processing. The former can be *activated by* pedagogy; the latter can be *developed through* pedagogy.

Although more attention is given by the CEFR, and by applied linguists in general, to strategies, it is, in my view, the process aspect which is of more interest since it is at the very core of both language use and of language learning. The recent sudden growth in

publications on Cognitive learning theory and pedagogical applications are indicative of this increasing interest in this area. Examples are: Robinson (2001); DeKeyser (2007); De Kop and De Rycker (2008); Robinson and Ellis (2008); Holme (2009). The CEFR gives several examples of “communicative language processes” (90); for example:

To speak, the learner must be able to:

- plan and organise a message (cognitive skills);
- formulate a linguistic utterance (linguistic skills);
- articulate the utterance (phonetic skills).

The second and third categories are reminiscent of Searle’s “propositional” and “phonic act” respectively (1969: 23-24). In the CEFR, the description of processing stages is of a macro-functional nature. However, certain Cognitive Linguists (for example, Doughty 2001) pursue the important question of the “micro-processes” that contribute to language processing.

As with the references to schematic knowledge, this category tends to be ignored by readers of the CEFR since it is not directly reflected in descriptors. Yet, it is of great importance for the design of teaching materials.

### 7.5. *Language activities*

Of the categories discussed in this section it is the “ability to put these competences into action” (131), which is no doubt the most accessible for language teacher and also that for which is best known. Moreover, it is the one which is most readily transmittable into competence descriptors. Teachers all over Europe and beyond are now familiar with categories such as those found in the “global scale” (24) or the “self-assessment grid” (26). It would in fact be more accurate to refer to such descriptors as “performance descriptors” since it is the “output/outcome” category of the communication model of figure 1 that is being described and assessed. The CEFR refers to this as “observable behaviour and performance” (14).

## 8. From communicative events to descriptors

Having identified the components of communicative events, the CEFR is then in a position to identify and describe through metalanguage “what learners must have learnt or acquired in order to participate with full effectiveness in communicative events” (131). The illustrative scales of descriptors contained in the CEFR refer to “three metacategories in the descriptive scheme” (25):

- the necessary competences/communicative language competences
- the ability to put these competences into action/ communicative activities (what I have termed performance)
- the ability to employ the strategies necessary to bring the competences into action.

In order to put these three categories into relation with each other we could say that performance = competence + processes & strategies.

Whilst the enormous contribution that the formulation of explicit and transparent descriptors has made to language learning, teaching and assessment is beyond doubt, one negative result of this is that for many teachers and teacher educators, too, their knowledge of the CEFR goes hardly beyond the language-activity descriptors and corresponding levels. As a result the underlying communicative and cognitive rationale of the CEFR tends to get lost.

## 9. Teachers' competences: the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*

If it is one of the principal goals of language teaching to develop the communicative and general competences of learners, it follows that teachers should possess pedagogical and didactic competences which support the development of learners' competences. It was this belief that led to the development of the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (EPOSTL) (Newby et al. 2007).

### 9.1. *The aims and structure of EPOSTL*

EPOSTL is a document intended for students undergoing their initial teacher education which encourages them to reflect on the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach languages, helps them to assess their own didactic competences and enables them to monitor their progress and to record their experiences of teaching during the course of their teacher education. The EPOSTL was developed for the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe by a team of teacher educators from five different countries (Armenia, Austria, Norway, Poland, UK). The EPOSTL builds on existing documents already developed by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe - *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)* and the *European Language Portfolio (ELP)* as well as the European Commission-financed project *European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference (European Profile)*.

At the heart of the EPOSTL are the 196 descriptors of competences related to language teaching which comprise the self-assessment section. These descriptors may be regarded as a set of core competences which language teachers should strive to attain.

The overall aims and much of the rationale of the *EPOSTL* is closely linked to the CEFR. This can be illustrated by examining a statement taken from the introduction to the *CEFR* (1):

The Common European Framework [ ... ] describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively.

This statement can be adapted to show what the *EPOSTL* aims to do, as follows: the *EPOSTL* describes in a comprehensive way what language teachers have to learn to do in order to teach a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to help learners to develop so as to be able to act effectively.

### 9.2. *EPOSTL descriptors*

Whilst the descriptors of *EPOSTL* are of a taxonomic nature, the form of organisation does not correspond to that of the CEFR. Whereas the CEFR categorisation derives from an analysis of language and general competence, the chapter headings in the *EPOSTL* derive from seven educational domains in which teachers require competences: Context (of learning and teaching), Methodology, Resources, Lesson Planning, Conducting a Lesson, Independent Learning, Assessment of Learning.

In order to understand the system underlying the *EPOSTL* descriptors, it is useful to distinguish between those which relate to a teacher's general competences and those which relate specifically to the development of competences, both general and communicative, specified in the CEFR. The first category - the minority of descriptors - can be analysed and exemplified using headings found in CEFR as follows:

### 9.3. Teachers' general competences

#### Knowledge (*savoir*)

- I can understand the principles formulated in relevant European documents (e.g. *Common European Framework of Reference, European Language Portfolio*). (Context, Curriculum, p.15)

#### Skills (*savoir-faire*)

- I can identify and investigate specific pedagogical/didactic issues related to my learners or my teaching in the form of action research. (Context, The Role of the Teacher, p.18)

#### Existential competence: (*savoir être*)

- I can appreciate and make use of the value added to the classroom environment by learners with diverse cultural backgrounds. (Context, The Role of the Teacher, p.17)

### 9.4. Didactic competences linked to the CEFR descriptors

Most didactic descriptors in the EPOSTL concern the development of the competences, both communicative and general, described in the CEFR. A few illustrative examples will be shown.

The illustrative scales of the CEFR refer to three “metacategories”: Communicative activities, Strategies and Communicative language competences (25ff.). I shall use these categories to exemplify the relationship between language-related descriptors taken from the CEFR and corresponding didactic descriptors in the EPOSTL

#### 9.4.1. *Communicative activities*

##### CEFR: Overall spoken interaction (74)

- B2: Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction, and sustained relationships with native speakers quite possible without imposing strain on either party. Can highlight the personal significance of events and experiences, account for and sustain views clearly by providing relevant explanations and arguments.

##### EPOSTL: Methodology. Spoken interaction (21)

- I can evaluate and select a range of meaningful speaking and interactional activities to develop fluency (discussion, role play, problem solving, etc.).

#### 9.4.2. *Strategies*

##### CEFR: Reading for orientation (.70)

- B1. Can scan longer texts in order to locate desired information, and gather information from different parts of a text, or from different texts in order to fulfil a specific task.

##### EPOSTL: Methodology, D. Reading (26)

- I can set different activities in order to practise and develop different reading strategies according to the purpose of reading (skimming, scanning etc.).

##### CEFR: Co-operating (86)

- B1: Can exploit a basic repertoire of language and strategies to help keep a conversation or discussion going.

##### EPOSTL: Methodology: A. Speaking/spoken interaction (21)

- I can evaluate and select various activities to help learners to identify and use typical features of spoken language (informal language, fillers etc.).

##### CEFR: Identifying clues and inferring (72)

- B1. Can identify unfamiliar words from the context on topics related to his/her field and interests. Can extrapolate the meaning of occasional unknown words from the context and deduce sentence meaning provided the topic discussed is familiar.

##### EPOSTL: Methodology: C. Reading (25)

- I can help learners to develop different strategies to cope with difficult or unknown vocabulary in a text.

### 9.4.3. General competences

*Intercultural awareness (CEFR 5.1.1.3):* knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community’ produce an intercultural awareness. (103)

EPOSTL: (Methodology, G. Culture p. 29)

- I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source material and activities which help learners to reflect on the concept of ‘otherness’ and understand different value systems.

*Ability to learn (CEFR 5.1.4)*

EPOSTL: (Independent Learning, A. Learner autonomy p.45)

- I can evaluate and select a variety of activities which help learners to identify and reflect on individual learning processes and learning styles.

### 9.4.4. Communicative language competences

*Grammatical competence (CEFR 5.2.1.2) CEFR: Grammatical accuracy (114)*

- B2. Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make mistakes which lead to misunderstanding.

EPOSTL: Methodology, E. Grammar

- I can evaluate and select grammatical exercises and activities, which support learning and encourage oral and written communication.

*Sociolinguistic Appropriateness (CEFR p.122)*

- B2. Can express him or herself confidently, clearly and politely in a formal or informal register, appropriate to the situation and person(s) concerned.

EPOSTL: Methodology, F. Vocabulary

- I can evaluate and select activities which enhance learners’ awareness of register differences.

*Discourse competence (CEFR 5.2.3.1) - Coherence and cohesion (125)*

Can use a variety of linking words efficiently to mark clearly the relationships between ideas.

EPOSTL: Methodology, B. Writing/written interaction

- I can use a variety of techniques to help learners to develop awareness of the structure, coherence and cohesion of a text and produce texts accordingly.

## 10. Conclusion

As has been seen, the road to defining and describing competence and performance has been long and circuitous and paved with a variety of theories from both theoretical and applied linguistics. Within language teaching, they are concepts which lie at the core of activities ranging from curriculum design to language assessment. As far as its description of communicative competences is concerned, it seems to me that the CEFR scarcely breaks new ground. Indeed, my own school textbook (Heindler et al. 1985), developed in the late 1970s, included many of its ‘innovative’ elements: a notional-functional syllabus, exercises to practise register, extensive use of what the CEFR refers to as praxeograms, self-assessment descriptors at the end of each unit etc. etc.

However, in other respects the CEFR certainly can be regarded as innovative. I would identify four features of the CEFR which have moved language learning and teaching forward considerably. These are:

- a) The indivisibility of, and complementarity between, *general* and *communicative competences*, applied, on the one hand, to the various culture-related categories - intercultural awareness; intercultural skills and know-how; ‘existential’ competence etc.; on the other to cognitive categories of schematic knowledge listed above under “non-linguistic reality”.
- b) The “action-oriented” view of language provides a strong focus on the *process* of *encoding* and *decoding*; i.e. *how* competence becomes performance.
- c) Its ‘can-do’ descriptors of “communicative activities,” describe not only competence but also *performance*.

- d) Despite its claim to be “non-dogmatic: not irrevocably and exclusively attached to any one of a number of competing linguistic or educational theories or practices” (8), clearly, both a *communicative approach* to learning and teaching and a *cognitive, constructivist view* of language and of learning are strongly represented. With the recent rise of interest in Cognitive theory among applied linguists and methodologists, the *mentalistic, sociological and cognitive framework* of the CEFR could serve as an important theoretical basis for teachers and methodologists wishing to teach and design materials according to communicative and cognitive principles.

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