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DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

MASTER OF ARTS THESIS IN TEFL

***The Underlying Structure of
Language Proficiency and
the Proficiency Level***



By :

Parviz Estiri

Supervised By :

Dr. Hossein Farhady

Thesis

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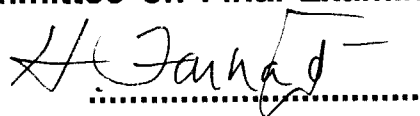
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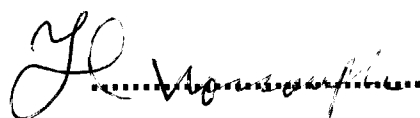
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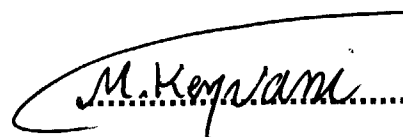
Committee on Final Examination :



..... Dr. Hossein Farhady,
Advisor



..... Dr. Hossein Vossoughi,
Reader



..... Dr. Majdeddin Keivani
Chairman of the English Department

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the possible relationship between the nature of language proficiency and the proficiency level. Some 314 male and female subjects, mainly English university students at BA and MA levels, participated in the study. The participants came from a diverse English proficiency levels (75 advanced, 113 intermediate, and 126 elementary). On the whole, some 36 appropriate and valid tests were used in this study. More specifically, the test battery at each level consisted of 12 tests including 2 listening comprehension, 2 dictation, 2 grammar, 2 vocabulary, 2 reading comprehension and 2 cloze tests. First, an original TOEFL was used to block the subjects into different proficiency groups. Then, the 12 tests at each level, organized into 3 test booklets, were given to the subjects. A one-way ANOVA conducted on the TOEFL scores ensured that the three groups were statistically different as far as their proficiency is concerned ($p < 0.01$). To investigate the possible underlying traits, factor analysis was conducted on the subjects' scores on the 12 subtests at each level. The final analysis showed that at advanced and intermediate levels a 3-factor solution was the best explanation for the data, while, at elementary level, a 4-factor solution was found to be the best explanation . It is concluded that the nature of language proficiency is to some extent ' *level-dependent* ' and varies with the proficiency level.



CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

Though an oversimplification, instruction can be conceived of an arrangement of events external to the learner and that are designed to facilitate the internal processes of learning (Lefrancois 1991). Moreover, the instruction process, including language teaching, can be analyzed in terms of three stages, each characterized by different demands on the teacher : before teaching, during teaching and after teaching. Generally speaking, these stages are concerned with : determining long - and short-term objectives, implementing strategies designed to lead learners to attain the objectives, and assessing the outcomes of instruction. As simplistic as this analysis may seem, it turns out that the first stage, that of determining objectives, is the most important stage in that the following two stages depend on it. Put the same thing differently, having clearly stated objectives is an undeniable necessity for the successful implementation of the following two stages of instruction .

In a nutshell, it can be concluded that the whole process of instruction depends on a clear definition of the subject matter which can serve as a handy framework from which instructional objectives can be driven .

By the same token, in language teaching, having a clear and explicit definition of language ability is the prerequisite step for any successful language teaching program. Such a definition which usually derives from a general theory of language ability (Bachman 1990) can be used as a framework to specify the objectives of the course which are, in turn, essential to both teaching and testing phases of instruction. In this regard, Canale and Swain (1980) stated that :

Such a theoretical analysis is crucial if we are to establish a clear statement of the content and boundaries of communicative competence - one that will lead to more useful and effective second language teaching and allows more valid and reliable measurement of second language communication skills (p. 1).

A similar justification for developing a theory of communicative competence has been proposed by Bachman et al. (1988). They claim :

One of the most pressing issues in the field of foreign/second language testing at present is that of defining the construct ' Communicative Competence' precisely enough to permit its assesment (p. 128) .

A cursory look at the history of language teaching and testing over the last few decades shows that scholars in the field have been aware of this urgent need, in that the teaching and testing of languages have been referred to some conceptualization of language ability.

The models proposed to describe second/foreign language proficiency so far vary in terms of the number and nature of the latent factors proposed in each model. Considering just the number of the factors in each model and ignoring other aspects, all the proposed models which have served language teachers and testers alike can be categorized into three broad categories : *Divisible*, *Indivisible* and *Partially Divisible* models.

The '*Divisible*' or '*Multi-dimensional Model*' (Oller & Hinofotis 1980) which dominated the field of language teaching/testing for more than three decades was the first systematic framework for describing language proficiency. In this model, it was believed that language ability can be segregated out into elements and skills which were essentially independent from one another. This multi-dimensional model formed the basis of performance matrices (Carroll 1961, 1968, Cooper 1972, Lado 1961) which were used both for teaching and testing purposes.

A completely different way of looking at language proficiency was formulated in the second model called '*One - dimensional Model*' or '*Unitary Hypothesis*' (Oller & Hinofotis 1980). This model was based on the existence of a unitary factor as the underlying structure of all language abilities. From Oller's theoretical perspective, language ability defined as an '*internalized expectancy grammar*' is a unitary and psychologically real construct which underlies all the processes of comprehending and producing sentences.

Oller's unitary hypothesis was obviously at odds with the previously proposed models (multi-dimensional). The existence of these seemingly mutually exclusive hypotheses (Oller & Hinofotis 1980) made scholars in the field take the issue more seriously. Numerous studies and theoretical arguments were presented to settle the issue in

favor of one or the other. Surprisingly enough, it was revealed that language ability is both unitary and divisible. Oller (1983) himself admitted that *Unitary Hypothesis* was wrong and concluded that :

There must be a general factor underlying performance on many language processing tasks. But, contrary to some earlier theorizing , it is agreed that this general factor will be componentially complex (p. 353).

After this general consensus regarding the possible nature of language proficiency different studies primarily designed to reveal the true nature of language ability have been conducted (Bachman 1990, 1991, Bachman et al. 1988, Bachman & Palmer 1982, 1981, Canale 1983, Fouly et al. 1990, Sang et al. 1986) and, as a result, different partially divisible models have been proposed.

The first substitute for Oller's *Unitary Competence Hypothesis* was the more wide-ranging model of Canale and Swain (1980) which came to be the dominant force in language testing theory. The model proposes that communicative competence consists of four components : *linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence* (Skehan 1988). Although this model was an improvement over the previous models, it had some weaknesses such as the unclear relationship between the four competencies and also the nature of the transition to communicative performance .

In 1990s, Canale and Swain model was improved by the Bachman's model of communicative competence and performance (Bachman 1990). This model consists of three aspects : 1) trait factors including language, pragmatic and strategic competencies, 2) skill factors, and 3) method factors. The striking feature of

Bachman's model which makes it unique is its concern with the competence-performance relationship. Although this model provides a systematic framework for the conduct of research in language testing, it is inevitable that it will be superseded and weaknesses will be revealed (Skehan 1988, 1991).

A complementary way of looking at second language proficiency was proposed by Corder (1986) when he introduced the term '*transitional competence*'. Corder's term expresses the idea that the second language knowledge system being developed by the learner is a dynamic one in a state of flux, constantly changing as new knowledge of the second language is added (Seliger 1988). Looking at language proficiency from this developmental perspective, some scholars like Vollmer, Sang and Milanovic (in Alderson 1991) introduced the probable interdependence between the nature of language proficiency and the level of proficiency. According to this recent hypothesis advanced learners show a unifactorial structure of language proficiency while virtual beginners exhibit a multifactorial proficiency .

This recently proposed hypothesis regarding the possible relationship between the structure of language proficiency and levels of proficiency was the main motivation for this study. So, this study aimed at finding out the claimed connection between the nature and structure of language proficiency with regard to the levels of proficiency .

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the nature of the underlying structure of language ability. According to Alderson (1991) the structure of language proficiency depends on and varies with the level of proficiency so that advanced