

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: PERFORMANCE AND COMPETENCE, A REVIEW*

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The second Summer Institute for English and Applied Linguistics, *Second Language Acquisition: Performance and Competence*, organized by the University of Cambridge in July 1993 dealt with the controversial issues of performance and competence in second language acquisition (SLA). It consisted of an introduction to the Institute, ten sessions, seven of which received double the time of the others and were divided into (a) a theoretical discussion of the present state of the research area discussed and (b) a review by the academic responsible for that particular session, of his own specific research in that area. There was also an open forum and closing remarks session.

Professor Gillian Brown, the Academic Director of the Institute, held the first and last sessions under the headings "Performance and competence in second language acquisition" and "Language learning and understanding" respectively; Sir John Lyons presented "Performance, competence and related notions"; Dr Paul Meara, "Current research on the acquisition and use of lexis in ESL"; Professor Philip Riley, "Developmental sociolinguistics"; Dr Vivian Cook, "Universal Grammar and second language acquisition"; Professor Noel Sharkey, "Connectionism and its relevance to modelling language learning"; Professor Jacquelyn Schachter, "A sensitive period for second language development"; Professor Elana Shohamy, "Testing 'competence'", and Professor Larry Selinker, "Competence and fossilization in interlanguage". Accompanying these sessions, four 10-hour workshops were held. Each participant was entitled to attend one of them. Their themes were "Pedagogic grammars and learners' dictionaries" supervised by Professor Keith Brown, "Translation performance and translating competence" with Dr Kirsten Malmkjaer, "Cognitive approaches to competence and performance" by Dr John Williams and "Measurement in language research and assessment" supervised by Alastair Pollit.

As can be inferred from the different titles of the sessions, the scope of the Seminar was both extensive and highly relevant, tackling issues of concern to researchers, theoreticians and practitioners in the field of linguistics, both theoretical and applied, and in related fields such as psychology, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, etc., and, from a more practical perspective, language learning and teaching, both first and second languages.

Brown recalled Chomsky's concern with linguistic theory, not with language use. According to him (1965:3), a native speaker knows his language *perfectly* and any interference he may suffer when he is applying his knowledge of language in actual performance is linguistically irrelevant. Thus, by competence will be understood the speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language. However, Chomsky himself (1980:59) has underlined how misleading the term 'competence' may be, since it suggests 'ability'. The reason for adopting this term is the avoidance of the many problems relating to 'knowledge'. However, he dissociates himself from any such association. This recollection of Chomsky's position, in relation to the distinction between competence and performance, served as a prelude to current debate on these issues. Chomsky deals with a cognitive notion of a learnable grammar, since he endeavours to characterize a psychologically plausible learnability. He is particularly concerned with language structure, i.e. syntax, which is particular to human language and which no other sign language possesses. He views the primary function of human language as a vehicle of cognitive growth. In contrast, variationist SLA researchers such as Tarone and Ellis account for SLA from a Heterogenous Competence Model. Ellis argues that a learner's competence "is inevitably variable because acquisition involves change, and change can only occur when new forms are added to the existing system, resulting in a stage where two (or more) forms are used for the same function" (1990:387). He posits that the only data available to construct a theory of second language (L2) competence are performance data. Tarone (1985: 35), for her part, contends that the systematic variability exhibited in the learner's performance is not a mere performance phenomenon, since it actually reflects his growing capability in interlanguage (IL). She (1990:392f.) argues that systems which are optimal at all times cannot contain gaps, thus disputing Gregg's (1990:368) contention that the learner's grammar must be viewed as optimal at all times. Opposing this view, Gregg (1990:377), a Universal Grammar (UG) oriented acquisition researcher, posits that what needs to be described is a speaker's knowledge, not his output. In his view, learners' IL is always a complete system. He (1990:368) explains learners' variable output to be a result of the gaps that are in their developing knowledge, agreeing here with the theorists in first language (L1) acquisition (Wexler and Culicover, 1980; Pinker, 1984) and with SLA (White, 1989), both of whom work within the Homogeneous Competence Paradigm.

After the controversies aroused by the dichotomy competence/performance by Brown's session, the other lecturers developed their own topics giving relevance to the many issues upon which this dichotomy impinges. Thus, Lyons surveyed it in the field of linguistics, accounting for the different conceptualizations it has undergone with different linguists and under different theorizing. Meara addressed the dimensions of lexical competence and how this is acquired in a L2, specifically English as a L2. Riley dealt with the sociology of knowledge, emphasizing an anthropological model of social learning. Cook discussed what linguistics is about, i.e. whether language is knowledge or behaviour, the Principles and Parameters Theory and its implications for SLA, giving special attention to the concept of multi-competence and its relation to UG. Sharkey dwelt on connectionism and computational science, illustrating the findings of connectionist natural language processing research. Schachter spoke on whether UG is available for the L2 learner, arguing that there is no evidence for this supposition on the basis of the findings of her study on the Subjacency Principle with Korean students. She also talked about the existence of a sensitive period

vs. a critical one for SLA. While the latter may hold for the ability to see, for example, the former refers specifically to language acquisition. It seems both late L1 acquirers and L2 learners who start their language acquisition after their teens acquire semantics and pragmatic aspects of language but have problems with grammar, i.e. syntax and morphology, and phonology. Shohamy focused on testing and what the concept of competence means for testers. According to her, this term, for them, means ability to use language. She discussed different issues relating to testing. Among them, (i) the perspective which understands language as multidimensional, not unidimensional; (ii) the need of undertaking not only quantitative but also qualitative analysis, since correlations usually hide a lot of information; (iii) the effect of text on learning, since it is usually taught spoken text instead of spoken language. All this constitutes language variables that have an effect on language use and testees' scores. Selinker approached the issues of competence and fossilization in IL, surveying the literature on transfer and distinguishing between stabilization and fossilization. Taking into account that fossilization means permanent arrested development, he stressed the fact that it cannot be actually proved, i.e. it cannot be demonstrated that someone who is arrested at a point in his language development will never change. Referring to Corder's (1967:25) concept of transitional competence, he posited it to be a key concept which implies competence to be functional. He strongly urged practitioners of language teaching to *do* IL analysis, not merely read about IL as a discipline. Brown, in her second intervention, reviewed some of the key points delivered in previous sessions in relation to the dichotomous concepts which framed this seminar and delved into the differences between process and product in performance already pointed out by Lyons. She also dwelt on the distinction between the processes of acquisition and learning. An open forum preceded the closing remarks session. In it, different questions were raised from the floor and answered by the pertinent lecturer present. Brown and Selinker conducted the final closing remarks session, highlighting major issues which had surfaced on different occasions during the seminar.

It is important to acknowledge the highly professional tone and rigour in which this Second Summer Institute Conference was conducted, it being one to which all who attended found immensely rewarding and profitable.

Notes

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