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Applied Linguistics to Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Unit 4: Foreign Language Knowledge and Course Planning

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1. Questions about knowledge in Foreign Language Teaching/Learning

Any question about the knowledge to be transmitted and acquired inside or outside formal educational institutions should ideally bring to the surface a series of theoretically informed questions about knowledge in general. Questions such as: Is knowledge a complex cognitive product or process? Is knowledge socially constructed? Does it have to do with subject position? What does knowledge entail (i.e., what else does it involve besides the ability to memorise and combine information)? Is the human capacity for the development of knowledge inherent? Does it depend mainly on the social environment? Is all knowledge linguistically mediated?

Furthermore, questions about knowledge to be transmitted and acquired in FL courses should ideally bring to the surface questions about linguistic knowledge in particular –questions that Foreign Language Didactics (FLD) has not always problematized adequately. The result is that there are a number of views that have dominated in the field and, whereas some are theoretically based, many views are based on commonsensical assumptions about linguistic knowledge. Here are some of them:

- (a) To know a language actually means to have native-like communicative competence (and literacy)
- (b) Knowledge of language entails knowing, on the one hand, how it works as a structural system (i.e., knowing rules of language usage) and, on the other how it is used in different social situations or communicative events (i.e., knowing rules of use).
- (c) Knowledge of language means having internalised rules of usage and use and being able to put them into practice to understand and produce sentences, paragraphs or larger texts (oral and written).
- (d) Some FL applied linguists believe that knowledge regarding language use entails sociolinguistic knowledge as well as knowledge of communicative strategies.
- (e) To know a language also means to know about the culture and society in which it is used.

Task 1:

Reflect on the views above and discuss the following questions:

1. Do all the so-called 'native-speakers of a language know the same things about it, and can they all do the same things with it? How much does their knowledge about language and their performance with it depend on their social background, education and level of literacy¹.
2. What types of knowledge, communicative competence(s), and what kind of skills do L1 users of a language have? [Before you answer this question, skim through Section 4 (on Communicative Competence below.)]
3. Read points (b) and (c) above again, which illustrate the understanding of form as distinct from meaning and use. On the basis of what was discussed in the previous Unit, about the two trends in Linguistics, decide which of the two trends legitimates this division.
4. These same points also pronounce other divisions that have been discussed in Linguistics, Cognitive Psychology and FLD, so that frequently the following have been viewed as distinct from one another:

¹ The term 'literacy', which has been translated in Greek in three different ways (i.e., «αλφαριθμητισμός», «εγγραμματισμός», «γραμματισμός»), is a notion which has traditionally been used to describe someone's ability to read and write. In New Literacy Studies however this notion has been problematized (see, for example J.P. Gee 1996/1999) and in other literacy studies the distinction between social literacy and schooled literacy has been made. Informed by such problematization, presently the term is used to describe one's ability to function in socially meaningful ways through both the oral and written mediums, as required by the environment in which s/he socially participates, using language to perform a variety of social practices.

- competence and performance,
- declarative and procedural knowledge.

Read Section 5 in this Unit, and decide if it is useful to think in terms of these divisions.

5. The commonsensical claim in point (e) above, raises a number of issues. By discussing them, one may come to question this claim to truth and reflect upon what kinds of cultural awareness the FL speaker needs to develop:
- If it is indeed true that “to know a language also means to know about the culture and society in which it is used”, which culture and society should speakers of English as a foreign language come to know about?
 - What does it mean “to know about the culture and society in which the language is used”? Does it mean to be informed about certain aspects of culture and social life? Which ones? How does one choose?
 - In what way does having accumulated knowledge about a culture and society in which a language is used facilitate one’s use of the target language?

2. Official knowledge in FLD

First of all, let us make one distinction here that may in fact be a useful one –a distinction between what is usually referred to as ‘official’ knowledge and what we could call ‘participatory’ knowledge.

- **Official knowledge:** The knowledge that has been pre-selected by the course planner or coursebook writer and organised in a particular way for teaching and learning, as well as for assessment purposes.
- **Participatory knowledge:** The knowledge that all the participants in a FL course bring into the pedagogic process, i.e. the teacher and learners. If this knowledge is considered important, not only for a-posteriori course planning but also for assessment of learner performance, it will affect what counts as legitimate knowledge in the course.

Task 2:

On the basis of the definitions above, think about the following two questions and discuss your answers:

1. Why is the distinction between official and participatory knowledge a useful one?
2. Does official knowledge planning generally respond to the literacy needs of the target group users?

3. Which knowledge is useful?

In order to decide which type of knowledge is useful, one must decide what this knowledge is useful for or for whom. Let’s put it another way. Suppose that the starting point of the language planner (who may be the instructional material writer) is not the language, as it usually is, but the learner as present and future user of the target language.

To make the learner/user the course planner’s starting point is actually a perfectly legitimate and desirable choice. When such a choice is made, however, the questions posed are quite different from when the starting point is language itself.

Task 3:

Consider the questions below, which an EFL course planner could pose, and decide which of the two questions has as its starting point the **language** and which the **learner/user**:

1. **Question:** What must EFL learners know about English and which skills must they have developed in order for them to communicate successfully?

Likely answer: They must know how the English linguistic system operates and they must have developed the skills to understand and produce spoken and written English.

2. **Question:** What will the EFL learners/users need to do with the language; that is, what will they be using English for?²

Likely answer: It depends on who the learners/users are and what their sociocultural context is.

3.1 Knowledge to meet users' needs

Note that the second FL course planner takes into consideration that, for example, Greek learners/users of English have different needs of use than say, EFL users in Spain or in Hong Kong. So do those who will be using it as a contact language with other EFL speakers inside and outside their own country and those using it for studies in the country where English is the official language. S/he also has in mind that their needs of use depend on a number of other factors, including age and the level and kinds of literacy they need to develop (not everyone needs to have the same types of literacy, the same level of proficiency and the same types of competencies and communication skills).

Task 4:

Now think about some of the common needs of Greek users of English in their professional and everyday environment. Think also about different kinds of competence that different groups of learners may need to develop. Finally, decide if mainstream courses and instructional materials are developed on the basis of such needs.

Task 5:

In discussing how official knowledge, i.e., course content, should be organised, mainstream FLD books usually have the language rather than users as their starting point. Think about what social implications this view has.

Task 6:

Now look at the specific questions frequently posed by FLD and the answers provided and compare them with each other. Also compare these presented below with what is in your own FLD textbook:

1. By posing the question "What is there to learn?" in a foreign language course³, one book claims that any FL learner must master the following:
 - **Systemic competence**, which covers knowledge and skill related to the way language works as a system. This involves many different levels, including pronunciation (phonetics and phonology), as well as grammar (morphology and syntax) and word meanings (semantics). [The course plan (syllabus) and instructional materials focus on pronunciation, morphemes and syntax, as well as vocabulary.]

² This is related to an issue discussed in the previous unit about different views of language, depending on whether the question posed is "What is language?" or "What is Language for?".

³ See, for example: Johnson (2001: 13-37).

- **Sociolinguistic competence**, which entails, on the one hand, knowledge and skill related to the (sociocultural) rules of language use and to the rules of discourse (i.e., how stretches of language are put together to form coherent and cohesive texts). It also entails knowledge and skill to use appropriate strategies of communication (e.g., repair mechanisms when there is breakdown in communication).
2. By posing a question oftentimes asked in FLD (i.e., What kinds of competence and skills should FL learners develop?) the answer usually is that they should develop:
- (Either of the two or both) Linguistic and Communicative competence. [Re: to Table 1 below.]
 - (Exclusively or in addition to other types of knowledge) skills required for comprehension and production, which are most commonly but wrongly referred as the 4 skills and less frequently but correctly referred to as reception and production skills.

3.2 User-oriented knowledge and syllabus planning

Thinking about what kinds of linguistic, communicative, or whatever other types of official knowledge and skills learners must master may lead to a course plan organised in terms of aims/goals/objectives to be achieved through the course, or to lists of linguistic, sociolinguistic, skills-related content (as knowledge to be acquired). Thinking, on the other hand, about what learners/users will be using language for may lead to lists of “can-do” statements, in other words lists of what they should be able to do with language on the basis of instruction.

Task 7:

Think about what implications this may have for teaching practices. Discuss them with a partner in class and write down your decisions.

4. Communicative competence in Foreign Language Didactics

The concept of communicative competence was extensively discussed by the American sociolinguist Dell Hymes. In one of his pioneering publications (1970), he claims that the types of rules described by Noam Chomsky may account for a native speaker’s knowledge of grammar but they are not sufficient to explain everything native speakers know about their own language. He explains that “There are rules of [language] use without which the rules of grammar would be useless.” In order for speakers of a language to communicate, they must have developed communicative competence. According to Hymes, such competence entails knowledge of both the rules of the language as a code and knowledge of the rules of use of the code –rules which are established within social groups.

According to Hymes, rules of use determine how we speak or write. That is, it determines the language we use, Hymes further explains. The choices which competent speakers of a language make, with regard to grammar, vocabulary, intonation, etc., vary according to the **context of situation**.

The notion of context of situation or **situational context** should be distinguished from the notion of **linguistic context**. Both kinds of context determine the meaning of words. However, the latter refers merely to the linguistic environment of a word which gives us clues as to its meaning. Think of the word ‘loud’ in two different linguistic contexts: “The music is too loud (meaning ‘noisy’)” and “He was wearing really loud chequered trousers (meaning ‘distastefully colourful)”. Situational context, on the other hand, which determines not only the meaning of words but also of utterances and even longer texts, refers to the broader social environment of language use. For example, think of the utterance “Back up, now!” in two different situations. It could be said by a driver who’s trying to get out of his

driveway because there is an emergency and another car is blocking him. In this case, it would mean 'take your car out of my way so that I can leave'. However, it could also be said by someone who knows that something is wrong with her friend's computer and is afraid she's going to be losing what she's working on. In this case, it would mean copy your work on disk or CD.

When we refer to the context of situation, we mean:

- **the setting** in which the communicative event takes place (for example, if it's in a church, an office or in a sports stadium).
- **the participants** who take part in the interaction and who may be of equal or non-equal status, age, etc., and whose relationship may be a distant or close one.
- **the purpose of the interaction** (for example if it is so that it aims at getting a job done, exchanging ideas, knowledge or information, relating on a social or emotional level).
- **communication channel** (through oral or written discourse).

Since Hymes's work, the notion has been further problematized and the following components have been discussed by various FLD scholars, such as Canale and Swain (1980).

Task 8:

Look at the components below (Table 1) and compare them with those that you read in order to do Task 6.

Table 1: Components of communicative competence

Component Name	Component Explanation
Linguistic or Grammatical competence	Knowledge of the forms of the language and their meanings; i.e. knowledge of lexical items, semantics, morphology, grammatical structure, syntax, pronunciation, spelling.
Sociolinguistic or Pragmatic competence	Knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and discourse. Learners' ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • select language which is appropriate to their communicative purposes, • select language which appropriate to the context, • understand the intended meaning (illocutionary force) of utterances.
Discourse competence	Knowledge of how to combine grammatical forms and meaning to produce a unified spoken or written text, involves ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • achieve cohesion and coherence in a text, • to take part in a conversation, This competence focuses on inter-sentential relationships.
Strategic competence	Ability to use strategies to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to compensate for communication breakdowns (e.g. use of paraphrase, word-coinage, repetition, appeals for help).

Task 9:

Faerch, Kasper and Phillipson (1986) claim that components of communicative competence interact with each other as in Figure 1, to produce fluency which leads to performance. Think about this claim and decide what's wrong with it.

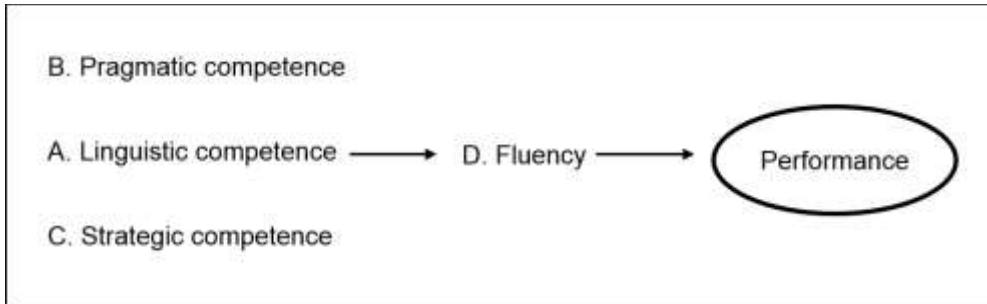


Figure 1: Relationship between components of communicative competence and performance.

Bachman (1990) believes that the components of communicative competence are those that follow (also diagrammatically displayed in Figure 2):

- **Organizational competence:** It entails the ability to **organise sentences** in an oral or written text, which entails knowledge of morphology, syntax, vocabulary and phonology or graphology, as well as competence to **organise a coherent text** in appropriate rhetoric.
- **Pragmatic competence:** According to Bachman, it entails **illocutionary competence** –in other words, the ability to perform with language so as to understand and produce messages which have the following functions: ideational functions (i.e., intended to convey ideas), manipulative functions (intended to persuade or dissuade), heuristic functions (i.e., intended to explore ideas, feelings, etc.) or imaginative functions (i.e., where language is used creatively (as in poetry, advertising, etc.)). It also entails **sociolinguistic competence** which refers to the ability to comprehend and produce the required register, dialect or variety of language and ‘natural’ language, appropriate for the context in which it occurs. It refers also to understanding contextualised figures of speech and/or cultural references.⁴

⁴ There are various other ways to understand notions of communicative competence and therefore different ways of classifying them for language teaching, learning and assessment purposes. Here is an example from the classification that the English team of the KPG exams makes: (a) Phonological competence, referring to intonation and pronunciation; that is someone’s ability to articulate clearly, to use stress patterns and rhythm which is fully intelligible and intonation that does not interfere with communication; (b) Sociolinguistic competence, which refers to appropriacy or appropriateness of language use and includes choice of expression suitable for the situational context, as well as linguistic choices meaningful for the communicative event; (c) Linguistic competence, referring to lexicogrammatical accuracy; that is, correct morphology of words and grammatical structures chosen, as well as correct word order (syntax), and self-correction after lapses or mistakes. Pragmatic competence, referring to speech cohesion and coherence; that is, use of correct and appropriate cohesive devices to link utterances and chunks of talk as well as fully coherent discourse. Smooth flow of speech with minor hesitations, stuttering, etc.

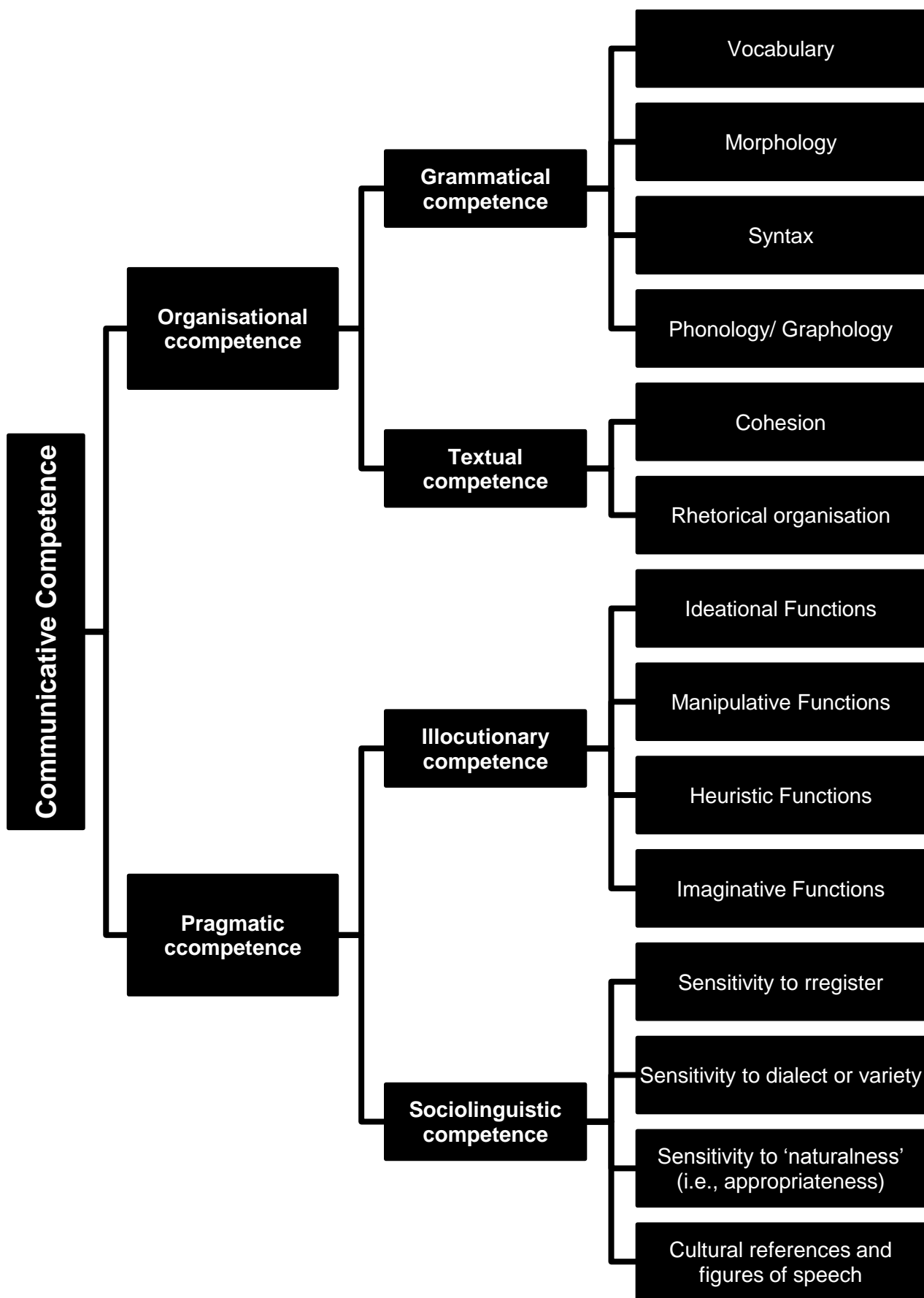


Figure 2: Components of communicative competence (Bachman, 1990)

Task 10:

Compare Bachman's model with the others above, and decide which trend in Linguistics this model is most consistent with.

5. Knowing, being able to and doing things with language

Having decided what kind of knowledge should be transmitted and acquired by the FL learner has certainly not solved the 'problem' of language teaching and learning. There are other important questions that arise about knowledge transmission and acquisition. And all of these questions, that concern the issue of how knowledge is put into practice, are of course central to all education. However, they become more pronounced when the outcomes of the pedagogic process are evaluated in social contexts outside the educational institution. This is the case with FL teaching and learning in ways that it is not with, say, literature, history, courses in religion or even mathematics. If the FL course does not equip learners with the ability to communicate with other users of the target language outside the classroom, this is something that can be directly assessed not only by teachers (as is the case for many other school courses), but by learners themselves and other stakeholders.

The 'putting-knowledge-into-practice' goal or, otherwise, the desire to have tangible and immediate practical results, is therefore of crucial importance in FL courses. Failure of the course to produce people that can use the target language for social purposes is visible and measurable. The desire to produce actual users raises, even more acutely than in other school subjects, crucial questions: whether **declarative knowledge** (knowing about) is more, less or equally important as **procedural knowledge** (knowing how). It also raises the question as to whether **competence** (the ability to do something) is equivalent with **performance** (actually doing it). Does knowing about something mean that we know how to do it? Does knowing that we should do (or say) mean that we will actually do it? Does having the ability to do something mean that we also practice it?

Task 11:

Read the subsections below and answer the questions posed above. That is:

- Is declarative knowledge as important as procedural knowledge or is it more /less important?
- Is competence (for example, communicative competence) the same thing as performance (for example, communicative performance)?
- Does knowing about something mean that we know how to do it? And, does having the ability to do something mean that we also practice it?

5.1 Declarative and procedural knowledge

We will all agree that just because we know that we should keep our shoulders straight, or that we should exercise, or that we should not smoke and drink, or that we should not eat junk food, that we always put this knowledge into practice. We would also agree that knowing about the communicative practices of the hearing-impaired does not mean that we know how to communicate with them ourselves. All this is clear and simple enough! It is common knowledge in daily affairs that there is a distinct difference between knowing about (having declarative knowledge) and knowing how to (having procedural knowledge.)

However, the situation is different insofar as pedagogic knowledge is concerned because, by nature, education is supposed to provide particular types of literacy that entails knowing about something so that schooled individuals can explain why something is done one way or another, and not simply do it. Take maths, for instance. The mathematically literate person should not only be able to solve a

problem but also have the knowledge and the ability (two different things) to explain why s/he chose one way of solving it rather than another, and also perhaps explain, if required to do so, why his/her solution is correct.

And there are a number of other relevant pressing questions that pop up in pedagogic settings but also in social life, such as: Is it possible for somebody to know how to without knowing about and vice-versa? Imagine someone swimming. Do you think that somebody can actually float on water and even make good swimming moves without knowing anything about how to swim? Now, think in terms of linguistic knowledge: Is it possible for somebody to speak a language and communicate quite well in fact without knowing anything about the linguistic system or its rules of use? The answer is not a definite yes or no. One may speak and sometimes even write perfectly well without knowing about the language; in other words, without knowing or, more accurately, without being able to justify why s/he used a particular linguistic structure or this word instead of that. However, somehow, if s/he's able to do it, s/he must have internalised some rules about how the language system operates by listening to others speaking, by imitating or merely by using the language. S/he must also have internalised some social rules of its use; in other words, s/he probably knows what to say or not to say in what situations, when to say and not say something, as well as what communicative purpose s/he will achieve if s/he says something in one way rather than another. In other words, s/he must have developed some kind of language awareness, but it is not necessary for him/her to have also learnt or acquired the metalanguage⁵ of language usage or use. Therefore, the related question in an FL course (where learners are instructed or even self-instructed in an environment which is very different from natural settings where the target language is used to meet all social needs) is multifaceted: Is that language awareness acquired or learnt? How is it mastered –by inductive or by deductive processes? Is the goal of the FL course to produce mere users of the language or literate users of the language – users who can also talk about the language and its use? We will return to these questions again in future Units.

5.2 Competence and performance through the FL

Returning now to the crucial issue of concern here, about “putting-knowledge-into-practice”, to use again an earlier example, we would probably agree that we may all have the ability (the competence) to learn sign language but only some of us do (acquire or learn sign language and actually use it (perform with it)). We would also agree that some people who ‘know’ sign language or any other language for that matter (in other words, they have developed a level of competence in this language) may not actually perform well sometimes or even all the time, particularly in some aspects of use. For example, there are people who ‘know’ a language very well, but they can't make a public talk, interview someone, write an official report, understand instructions, directions and maps. Or, although they may be able to cope perfectly well with two languages, they are unable to transfer messages from one language to another.

The statements above bring to the surface crucial issues for teaching, learning and particularly for assessment. What is teaching and learning concerned with? Is it only about developing linguistic or sociolinguistic competence, or also about developing particular comprehension and production skills and strategies? Is the distinction between linguistic competence and performance that first Saussure in 1916 and much later Chomsky (1957) made a useful distinction for language teaching and learning? What about for FL assessment? Should one and is it possible to assess the FL user's linguistic or sociolinguistic competence or only his/her performance? In other words, do we or can we assess competence (i.e., what the user is capable of doing) or performance (what s/he actually does)?

⁵ Metalanguage is a term used for the language that explains about language usage or use, as well as other phenomena and practices for that matter.

Further to the above, is it useful to distinguish between linguistic/sociolinguistic competence, on the one hand, and communication skills, on the other? What kind of skills are communication skills? Is speaking for example a single skill and listening comprehension another, or are there many skills required for, say, the understanding of texts or for constructive participation in conversation? Do these skills have to do with perception and production as two distinct elements? And, are these skills linguistic, sociolinguistic or cognitive?

There are also other issues related with learning and acquisition, but these will be discussed in future Units.

Task 12:

Now that you have completed this Unit and problematized on a variety of issues, provide informed responses to the following questions:

- What does it mean 'to know a language well' and 'to use it successfully'?
- What kinds of FL knowledge, competence or ability, and skill(s) must one have?
- What do we mean when we say that a person is a 'competent user' of the language?

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Notes

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Figure 2: Components of communicative competence based on Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford University Press.

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