

Identity and Proficiency: Meaningful Approaches to Learning and Assessment

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Abstract

Language proficiency is central to both teaching and assessment, yet proficiency testing and communicative teaching typically address not proficiency, but behavioristic notions of linguistic performance, failing to address whether learners are authentic users of language and constraining them to mimicry rather than language use. This paper examines the notion of language proficiency by arguing that the ability to create and project a range of identities is fundamental to becoming a proficient user, and that teaching and assessment must address this use of language. The primacy of language use over behaviouristic performance has profound implications for both materials writers and test designers, and it is argued that the nature of commercial texts and tests precludes this use of language, so it is the role of the classroom teacher to fill this void.

Any discussion of language teaching or assessment ultimately rests on defining a conception of language proficiency, as Hadley (2001) reminds us, “In one sense, a focus on proficiency has always driven language learning and teaching. Obviously, no program has ever claimed to be oriented toward ‘non-proficiency’ or incompetence.”

Improving students’ English is an uncontroversial goal, the problem lies in agreeing what proficiency is and the mechanisms by which it can be taught or acquired, or in technical terms, in defining a teaching approach. Richards and Rogers’ (2001) well known framework defines a teaching approach as including a theory of language and a theory of learning, and similarly we can define a testing approach as including a theory of language and a theory of assessment. From this we can see that a coherent curriculum will define integrated teaching and testing approaches based around a shared theory of proficiency, which in turn means that a theory of proficiency is needed before we can plan instruction or assessment. Attempting to design curriculums or tests without ascertaining whether stakeholders agree on a conception of proficiency is recipe for confusion and acrimony.

Unfortunately there are many different things that combine to give language proficiency, such as fluency, grammar, vocabulary knowledge, and so on, but deciding the relative importance of each, their relationship to each other, and organizing them into a practical framework for classroom use is difficult.

One historically influential view is behaviorism, which, as Searle (1998) explains, holds that “...the mind reduces to behavior and dispositions to behavior. For example, to be in pain is just to

engage in pain behavior or to be disposed to engage in such behavior.”, so behaviorists think that we should focus only on objectively observable behavior, not internal mental events because these are subjective, so language proficiency means responding appropriately to stimuli and teaching language means teaching students to respond appropriately to the stimuli they can expect to encounter. The implication of this is that curriculum planners, materials writers, and test designers must base their decisions on analysis of large, representative corpuses of language in use so as to determine the full range of contexts and stimuli and appropriate responses for every conceivable situation.

Besides the obvious practical difficulty of such an undertaking, behaviorism has other fundamental problems, one being that we do intend our words to convey inner mental states to other people, even if there is uncertainty about how accurately this occurs, as Quine (1970) shows, so behaviorism quite simply misses the point of language use. Another problem, as Pinker (1994) points out, is creativity in language, because children don't just mimic language they've heard, but quickly begin to create new expressions that they haven't learnt from others. Rather than being simple phrasebook memorization, language proficiency involves creative production based on systems of generative rules, or grammars, that define what is meaningful and what is not.

This generative grammar view, as Pinker (1994) explains, revolves around a “deep grammar” that defines the rules that allow us to generate sentences that other speakers will comprehend, so we can create new expressions and communicate new meanings, and proficiency is defined by the

precision and variety of meanings a speaker can communicate and comprehend.

Unfortunately there are problems with the generative model, one of these being that language use displays a lot of variation, such as dialects and formal and informal registers, so the speech of a “prototypical native speaker” is impossible to define precisely and writing a list of generative rules that define proficiency does not seem to be a practical undertaking, as Wardhaugh (2006) explains. Further to this, as Ellis (1994) explains, variation in learner interlanguage is central to language learning, so the generative model does not adequately account for the mechanisms involved in learning a second language.

However, if we define proficiency in terms of communicating with others, as in the currently popular communicative approach (Richards, 2006), then it may not be necessary to formally define all the rules of language because proficient language users can recognize other proficient language users, in a manner similar to the well known Turing test, a proposal for

“...a test of a machine's capability to perform human-like conversation.....a human judge engages in a natural language conversation with two other parties, one a human and the other a machine; if the judge cannot reliably tell which is which, then the machine is said to pass the test.” (Wikipedia, 2004)

Communicative views can thus base proficiency on human judgments, but this leaves the problem that we can only judge a speaker's observable performance, which may show great variation from moment to moment (ACTFL-ALC Press, 1996), leading to the distinction between competence and performance, where competence describes our underlying knowledge, which is

stable but impossible to measure directly, while performance describes our use of knowledge at specific time, which is objectively observable, but is variable. This means is that communicative views and behaviorism both rely on observing behavior, but communicative views use this to make inferences about internal mental states, although the reliability of these judgments is a major difficulty in testing (Brown, 2005).

Given that our judgments about competence are based on observation of performance, the essential question becomes what types of performance are important and how these should be categorized. Grammar must be a central consideration in any model of proficiency, but there are many other language features that contribute and it's difficult to isolate one component of proficiency from all the others in dealing with actual language use. Grammatical accuracy without fluency or vocabulary is of little communicative value, leading to the view of proficiency as a holistic trait composed of a number of components, and thus describable only in terms of all the components operating together, not in isolation.

Canale and Swain (1980) developed an influential model of proficiency, where communicative competence is divided into grammatical, contextual, and sociolinguistic competencies. Bachman (1995) followed this with a distinction of language competence and strategic competence, where language competence is the knowledge specific to language while strategic competence is the use of general metacognitive abilities to apply language competence, as shown in Appendix 1. Language knowledge is divided into organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge, with organizational knowledge subdivided into grammatical knowledge of

sentences, and textual knowledge of cohesive discourse. Pragmatic knowledge includes knowledge of propositional content, functional knowledge of speakers' intentions, and sociolinguistic knowledge of context. Similarly, strategic competence is divided into three sets of metacognitive strategies; assessment, goal setting, and planning, further subdivided into seven metacognitive strategies.

As Hadley (2001) explains, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are an influential attempt at defining proficiency, so tests based on this, such as the Standard Speaking Test, or SST (ACTFL-ALC Press, 1996), aim to holistically assess global communicative proficiency, and attempt to address multiple components of proficiency simultaneously. However two things are given quite high priority in the SST, on the basis that they seem to be relatively simple to define and assess and provide proxies that correlate highly with overall proficiency, so these are typically the first features that SST raters consider during the rating procedure. The first of these features is known as "oral text type" in SST terminology, the other initiative, so it's worth quickly reviewing these, as shown in Table 1, derived from the *Standard Speaking Test Manual* (ACTFL-ALC Press, 1996).

Oral text type appears to closely match Bachman's organizational competence and is heavily weighted because it is easy and reliable to assess. Organizationally, novice speakers can't always sustain performance at the level of sentences, intermediate speakers use a wide variety of sentence patterns, but can't always organize these into coherent discourse, while advanced speakers can produce coherent paragraph-like discourse.

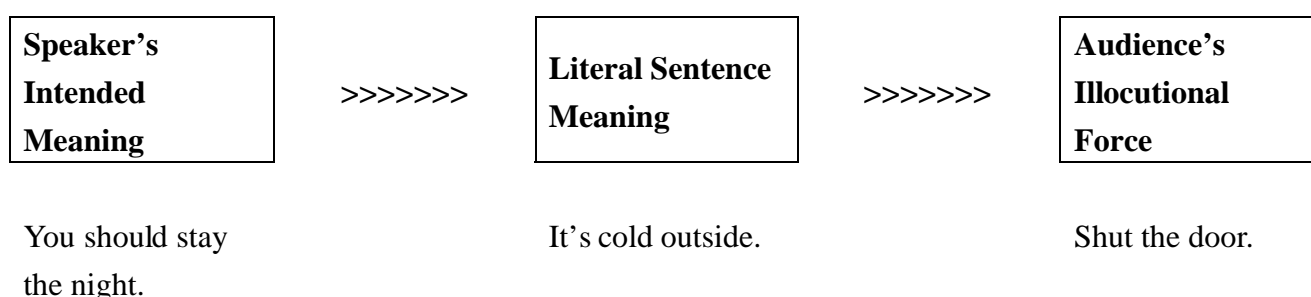
Table 1: ACTFL Proficiency Descriptors		
	Oral Text Type	Initiative
Novice:	Words, phrases, some sentences	Depend almost entirely on sympathetic partner, typically only able to respond to direct questions.
Intermediate:	Variety of sentence patterns, strings of sentences, some use of subordination, can't organize longer discourse effectively.	Can initiate and maintain communication with a sympathetic partner on familiar topics in informal settings.
Advanced:	Can organize complex sentences into paragraph-like discourse.	Can initiate and manage communication with non-sympathetic partners in a wide range of formal and informal contexts.

Initiative relates to who carries the burden of communication, so novice speakers depend almost entirely on a sympathetic partner to initiate and maintain communication, whereas advanced speakers have the full range of skills needed to initiate, maintain, manage, and terminate communication on their own terms. In other words, advanced level speakers can negotiate meaning autonomously, instead of being dependent on a sympathetic partner to manage the communication.

The emphasis within the ACTFL framework on negotiation of meaning complicates our theory of proficiency, however, so it's necessary to review the implications of this. When we say something, our words have a literal, or locutional, meaning, for example "It's cold out there.", but there could be several intended meanings, such as "Why don't you stay the night?", or "Shut the

door!”, so the listener must infer the intention from the context, resulting in an illocutional force on the listener’s mind. However, the illocutional meaning might differ from the intentional meaning, as Hatch (1992) explains, which puts subjective judgments at the heart of proficiency, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

Fig 1. Subjectivity of meaning.



Further complicating this, we have literary devices such as irony, where the intended meaning is completely opposite to the literal meaning, and metaphor, where the intended meaning isn't part of the literal meaning at all, so before a listener can assign an illocutional meaning, they must assess the relevance of the locutional meaning to the context of the utterance, so comprehension depends heavily on contextual and cultural knowledge, as well as the linguistic knowledge used in decoding the locutional meaning. If the utterance does not match any contextual clues available to the listener, than the listener is unable to find any relevance in the utterance, and it will be pragmatically meaningless, regardless of locutional meaning it may carry. Unfortunately, every person's knowledge and experiences are different, so what is relevant to one person's stock of knowledge and experiences can be completely irrelevant to another's, and thus different listeners

might make completely different judgments about the pragmatic meaningfulness of an utterance because we cannot assign illocutional meaning to an utterance that is not relevant to our existing schemata of knowledge and experience. The implication of this is that there is an unavoidable subjectivity to meaningfulness and no purely mechanical description of proficiency is possible.

Thus, in order to ensure that the participants in communication are actually communicating, we must give constant feedback to each other to check that we have a shared agreement on what our utterances mean, so negotiation of a shared meaning that is relevant to the existing knowledge and experiences of all participants is at the heart of communicative proficiency.

From this it is obvious that the audience does not just receive meaning from the speaker, but must make considerable effort to actively construct meaning, and, as Hatch (1992) points out, this creative process of constructing a shared meaning is central to giving it emotional value to us, over and above the simple communication of facts.

The problem this raises, though, is that the communication of information beyond rather trivial factual data requires us to convince other people to empathize with us in order that they will share our feelings about why the communication is relevant to them, so empathy must precede communication of facts, and thus a model of empathy is central to a description of proficiency.

Nicholas Humphrey (1986; 2006) investigates empathy from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, based on the assumption that the human brain and intelligence evolved due to providing a survival advantage. Given that, as Pinker (1994) explains, human language has a

physical basis in the structure of our brains, the evolution of brains structured to learn and use language implies that language use and proficiency must have evolved due to conferring some survival advantage.

Humphrey found gorillas puzzling because their physical behavior is not particularly complicated and doesn't appear to require a lot of cognitive power, so it's not obvious why they evolved large brains. Instead, Humphrey theorizes that gorillas actually use most of their brain power to calculate social relationships, not physical action, and the increased social skills conferred a survival advantage on the large-brained individuals.

Similarly, if language was just used to communicate factual information, the subjectivity of meaning would be a handicap because it complicates communication far beyond the locutional meaning that codes the factual data, but if we view language as a tool used to develop empathy with other people and maintain social harmony, then this subjectivity has an evolutionary purpose because, as Hatch (1992) points out, the negotiation of meaning serves as emotional glue. Thus, rather than describing proficiency in terms of communication of information, we need a model that puts negotiation of empathy as central.

Humphrey further argues that empathy is based on physical sensation, not perception, so we physically feel the same sensations as others when we see them undergo a stimulus. For example, if we watch someone having an accident, we have an involuntary physical feeling that mimics the sensation they feel, the physical jolt in our stomach we feel, and Humphrey argues that this sharing of physical sensations is where empathy comes from, which implies that physical feelings

play a central role in language use, and thus that face-to-face contact is essential for developing or assessing language ability.

In addition to empathy, Humphrey also describes an “Inner Eye” (Humphrey, 1986), which allows us conscious awareness of ourselves and conscious monitoring of our interaction with the physical and social environment. Thus it is the combination of physical empathy and abstract consciousness that lets us understand how other people are feeling and construct a theory of our identity in relationship to other people, which then makes it possible to negotiate social roles and use language for communication.

This is illustrated by the problems that Norton (2000) describes in her study of immigrants, namely that before communication can take place, we have to be recognized by other people as having an identity that has the right to speak. When we dehumanize other people, we deny them empathy, so we have to be humanized in the eyes of other people or else what we say won't be considered meaningful. The immigrants that Norton studied could not negotiate an English speaking identity that matched their own sense of identity and were excluded from meaningful participation. Anything they said was irrelevant because nobody would listen, regardless of any literal meaning that their words might convey, so their inability to negotiate an identity worthy of empathy in the eyes of native speakers rendered them incapable of communicating, regardless of any formal language proficiency they might have acquired.

On this view, individuals do not have a single, unchanging identity, but construct identities to fit the norms of the social context they find themselves in. We typically belong to a number of

different groups (Wardhaugh, 2006). The author, for example, belongs to the groups of pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent), New Zealanders, philosophy majors, language teachers, mountain bikers, and many other groups. Each group, however, has different social and linguistic norms, so the code appropriate for talking to other mountain bikers is not appropriate for talking to other language teachers, meaning that each social identity we wish to adopt requires negotiation with other group members over mutual acceptance of social and linguistic norms. If language learners cannot access the code required to gain acceptance by members of the target group, they will not be seen as legitimate speakers and what they say will not be considered meaningful to the target audience, leading to the problems that Norton documented.

Further to this, unlike the physical environment, our social environment is subjectively constructed through the cooperation and negotiation of people, and thus individuals who are more proficient negotiators have greater power over the social environment and can manipulate it to their own ends. The minimal social survival level of proficiency requires awareness of the norms of the social environment we are in and the ability to adopt a social identity acceptable to others, but advanced proficiency entails more active control over the social environment, so advanced users of language must be able to take initiative in defining social norms and assigning roles.

Thus, in seeking to define language proficiency, we must include negotiating an L2 identity that other language users will accept. Given that learners must learn to negotiate a wide range of social contexts, no single identity will suffice, so, if learners wish to become fully proficient users of language, they must be able to project a range of identities appropriate for the full range of

social contexts found in the target language. Without this, no amount of grammar or vocabulary will allow them to communicate, so our proficiency descriptors need to reflect this. Table 2 illustrates how this might be attempted.

Table 2. Modified Proficiency Descriptors			
	Organization	Initiative	Identity Negotiation
Novice:	Words, phrases, some sentences	Depend almost entirely on sympathetic partner, typically only able to respond to direct questions.	Have little grasp of the social contexts of the target language, must rely on sympathetic partners to assign social roles, identities are not fully grounded in the social reality of the target language and culture.
Intermediate:	Variety of sentence patterns, strings of sentences, some use of subordination, can't organize longer discourse effectively.	Can initiate and maintain communication with a sympathetic partner on familiar topics in informal settings.	Can sometimes project an identity of their own with help from a sympathetic partner, but often only respond to a social reality defined by other, unable to negotiate preferred identity with a non-sympathetic partner.
Advanced:	Can organize complex sentences into paragraph-like discourse.	Can initiate and manage communication with non-sympathetic partners in a wide range of formal and informal contexts.	No longer have to accept social roles imposed by others, can participate as equals in defining the social reality and assigning roles and identities.

Therefore, to summarize, rather than simply teaching students to mimic the behavior of native speakers, proficiency development requires students to develop awareness of their own identity within the social contexts available in the target language and to learn how to negotiate an identity

that other speakers will accept and empathize with.

Defining proficiency is an important first step, but equally important to classroom teachers is finding practical ways that students can improve their proficiency, so it's worth quickly reviewing Communicative Language Teaching, given the current emphasis on this methodology.

The goal of Communicative Language Teaching, or CLT, is to learn to communicate, of course, but what is just as important to understand is that communication is also the mechanism of learning, the idea being that by using language meaningfully, students develop proficiency. (Richards, 2006). Underlying this is the contentious assumption that language use revolves around communication, so if we consider the tasks used in a random selection of popular commercial textbooks, such as Wilson and Barnard (2007), Martin (2003), Soars and Soars (2001), Helgeson, Brown, and Mandeville (2004), and Richards, Hull, and Proctor (1997), we can see whether negotiation of meaning and identity plays a significant role, and hence whether the language use can be considered authentic. Looking at these texts, we can see that the tasks in them are predominantly mechanical repetition and demand little creativity or negotiation of meaning on the part of learners. In short, these tasks are dominated by behavioristic drills, not intrinsically meaningful language use.

The next sample, given in Appendix 2, is material written specifically for my own classes, aimed at nurturing meaningful language use in novice level high-school learners. This activity is intended to encourage learners to actively construct a picture of who the teacher is and then reflect on themselves, giving them a foundation to begin building an English speaking identity of their

own in the context of that specific classroom. The meaningfulness of this activity rests on students actively working to relate the information about their classroom teacher to themselves, so it will not be meaningful in any other classroom. Additionally, some high-school students are simply not interested in meaningful use of English, so this material allows students the choice of using language mechanically should they prefer this.

Unfortunately classroom teachers are usually too busy to write every lesson from scratch, so reliance on commercial textbooks is unavoidable. However, commercial reality dictates that these texts must appeal to the widest possible audience and therefore can not be relevant to specific contexts in the way that teacher prepared material can, as they will lack the subjective meaningfulness that is central to authentic language use. On top of this, inexperienced teachers and unmotivated students must be able to use commercial textbooks mechanically, so they must, by their very nature, be overwhelmingly behavioristic.

This result of this is that the creation of meaningfulness falls to classroom teachers, who have the face-to-face contact with students that underlies meaningful language use, so an essential skill for classroom teachers to develop is writing customized material to supplement commercial textbooks, and many classroom teachers seem to do this. The danger, however, is that it is difficult not to just mimic what commercial texts do, because creating, trialing, and revising meaningful material can be extremely time-consuming, so copying the type of activities found in commercial texts is a quicker and safer way to do things. However, doing this defeats the greatest benefit of having a human teacher in the classroom, namely the face-to-face negotiation that this makes

possible, so developing effective teaching material must be considered a key skill of classroom teachers.

Obviously, similar questions can be asked about classroom assessment, so it's instructive to briefly compare standardized tests with classroom assessment. Standardized tests are used to compare large numbers of students at different times or places, so they must be cheap, easy to administer, reliable, and correlate with the knowledge or proficiency under consideration (Henning, 1987; Brown, 2004).

All tests must be valid, of course, but a test that's valid for one purpose might not be valid for something else, and the validity of a standardized test requires reliability, meaning that if candidates take the test twice then they should get the same result or we can't use the test to compare different groups of students.

For reasons of practicality, test designers must find a manageable number of proxies for the construct under consideration, that are sufficiently cheap and reliable enough to be administered on a large scale, so standardized tests can't directly measure all the components of proficiency. Rather their validity is typically established by showing that their scores correlate with other accepted measures of proficiency.

The problem this raises for classroom teachers is that a curriculum that focuses narrowly on a specific test is unlikely to cover all the components of proficiency, but when tests are perceived as having high-stakes, there may be the temptation to narrow the curriculum to focus only on test content, which is known as negative washback, or backwash (Andrews, 2004).

However, classroom teachers face a different context to the designers of standardized tests, with different constraints and opportunities. Thus, rather than mimicking standardized tests' emphasis on reliability in one-off, high-stakes contexts, classroom teachers can use many small assessments that cover a wide range of content and skills and emphasize washback and formative features.

Washback is the result of how we perceive a test, which is inherently subjective (Cheng and Curtis, 2004), and classroom teachers, due to the face-to-face contact they have with students, can influence students' perceptions quite directly, whereas standardized test designers can not. The implication of this is that classroom teachers should be very careful about basing classroom tests too closely on standardized tests, but instead need to take advantage of the empathy that can be developed with students to do things that standardized tests can't do. Reliability of such tests will probably be poor if they are used as a one-off assessment, but by using a series of small assessments, sufficient reliability should be possible that nobody is treated unfairly.

Such an approach complicates classroom teachers' jobs somewhat, however, because the test and curriculum must be integrated parts of a holistic course design, so consideration of how to assess performance on classroom tasks needs to be a central concern of the entire materials writing process, not a mere afterthought. Thus, if we accept that negotiation of identity is central to language use, then our classroom assessment tasks must be designed accordingly, and our classroom teaching tasks must also be designed with assessment in mind.

Unfortunately, given that every classroom is a unique context, no single type of assessment

will be universally applicable, so teachers must develop a broad repertoire of assessment tasks and select assessment types appropriate for the particular situation they find themselves. However, it is useful to consider one set of tasks that have been useful with my own university classes and which illustrate one approach to meaningful assessment.

This task, as shown in Appendix 3, requires students to write a diary entry every week and then work in groups to find interesting things from each others' diaries. While they are doing this, the teachers moves from group to group and holds short mini-discussions about their diaries, giving students the opportunity to work together to create a meaningful discourse on familiar topics from their everyday lives. Rather than basing assessment on linguistic features, grades are based on making a genuine attempt at negotiating empathy, on the assumption that making this is what will lead to developing an English speaking identity and making long-term progress in acquiring English. Simply taking up invitations to communicate is enough for a passing grade, but refusing to take part meaningfully is not, and taking the initiative in communication warrants a superior grade. This activity, although advocated here as an assessment task, was originally designed as a teaching task aimed at preparing students to take an interview test such as the ACTFL SST (ACTFL-ALC Press, 1996) and the use of it for assessment was later added to extrinsically motivate learners by rewarding behavior considered beneficial to language learning, and this illustrates how teaching and assessment approaches can be integrated around the same tasks, based on a shared model of proficiency and model of learning.

Conclusions

The central argument of this paper is that a model of proficiency is central to both successful teaching and language learning, but that behavioristic conceptions of proficiency based solely on observable performance are not adequate to describe meaningful language use, which revolves around generating empathy with others and, by doing so, negotiating an identity for ourselves appropriate to the social context. It follows from this that, if CLT's claim that authentic use of language is the major mechanism of learning, then the use of language in the classroom must heavily emphasize negotiation of empathy and identity at the level of individuals. However, commercial textbooks and standardized tests cannot achieve this, given their need to appeal to the mass market, so it is the role of classroom teachers to fill this gap, and this in turn means that classroom teachers must focus on developing materials and assessments that address the specific needs of the individuals in their classrooms rather than simply relying on the type of generic tasks found in commercial textbooks.

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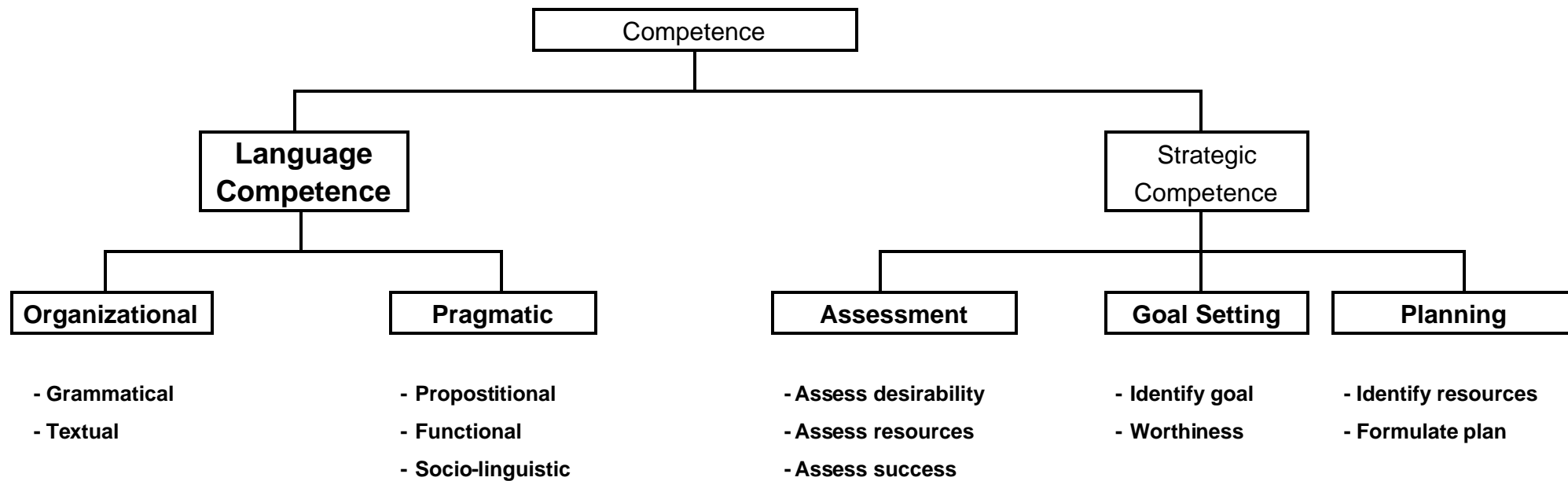
Further Reading

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Appendix 1: Bachman's Taxonomy of Proficiency



Derived from Bachman (1995)

Appendix 2: Sample Lesson Material

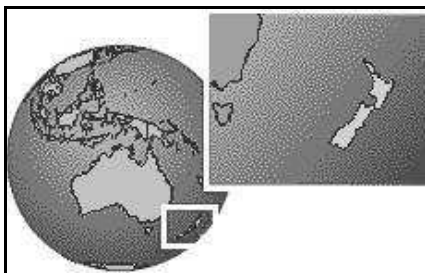
About My Teacher.

In Groups.

Look at the pictures. Try to guess about your teacher? Write sentences below.

下の絵を見て、先生についてどんなことが想像できますか？例にならっていくつか文を書きなさい。

Example: *Trevor is from New Zealand.*



Asking questions.

Ask the teacher one question. Write your question below and then write one sentence about the teacher.

先生にひとつ質問をし、その質問と、先生の答えをもとに文をひとつ書きなさい。

Example: *Q. Where are you from? A. I'm from New Zealand.*

Sentence: He's from New Zealand

Your Question:

Sentence:

Writing.

Talk to other students. Work together and write as much about the teacher as you can.

他の学生と一緒に、お互いの質問したことを合わせて、先生についてできるだけ沢山書きなさい。

Writing

Complete the story about the teacher.

The teacher's name is _____.

He's from _____.

He's _____ but he doesn't have any children.

He likes _____.

He has a pet _____. Her name is _____.

He has _____ brothers and _____ sisters.

His hobby is _____.

About You

Write as much as you can about yourself. 自分についてできるだけ沢山書きなさい。

Diary Review

Work in Groups

Work together. Discuss each others' diaries. Try to find five interesting things from your group. Write notes below, then prepare to tell the teacher about the interesting things from your group.

グループで作業しなさい。グループの中で5つ興味深い出来事を見つけなさい。それらの事について下に記入し(下の例を参照)、先生に英語で言えるように準備しなさい。

e.g. Ken watched a movie last weekend. It was called "The Aviator". It is about Howard Hughes. Howard Hughes was a famous movie director and pilot. The movie sounds interesting, so I want to watch it.

Partner 1:

Partner 2:

Partner 3:

Partner 4:

Partner 5:
