Language Skills
Language Skills: Traditions, Transitions and Ways Forward

Edited by

Halina Chodkiewicz and Magdalena Trepczyńska
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The conviction that one develops a range of skills in order to acquire and use a language has been shared in the area of second/foreign language teaching and learning for many decades now, yet theoretical conceptualizations and practical guidelines for classroom applications have been a matter of continuous reconsiderations. With the growth of the Direct and Audiolingual Methods the main interest became the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, their sequencing and implementation of effective instructional techniques for their teaching in classroom conditions, which, as we understand it now, is a too narrow view of the issue. The shift of attention to a scientific explanation of how language skills are acquired was connected with the influences from linguistics as well as with psycholinguistic interpretations of human skilled behaviour and its acquisition in terms of declarative and procedural knowledge, whose implications for language classroom practice were considerable. The acceptance of the skill-theory oriented language instruction demands that the effects of the process of automatization are well-understood, and appropriate conditions are created for language learners so that they can successfully acquire all the aspects of language use. Such an approach to language skills development has far-reaching implications for the organization of classroom work and for providing learners with quality practice conducive to the development of multiple aspects of language bottom-up and top-down processing. Going beyond the traditionally distinguished four language skills and the search for new solutions for language teaching practice in recent years has brought into focus the problem of skills integration, the notions of interactional competence and intercultural communicative competence, as well as the pragmatics of the relationships between the participants of communicative events.

The current volume deals with the many and varied issues their authors have found important to explore under the general theme of language skills. The volume’s contributors not only show a wide academic interest in the topic, but also point to the multiaspectuality of language-skilled behaviour discussing many attributes of language use and its growth from the perception of speech sounds to discourse production. A number of chapters included in this book report on original empirical studies concerning learning, teaching, and assessment/testing aspects of L2 language skills development. They emphasize the roles played by teachers
and learners – members of different age groups in diverse educational and social contexts, involved in activities focused on isolated or integrated skills aimed to improve a range of learners’ competences. We found it logical to present the chapters included in the book in six sections, respectively devoted to: fundamental background issues, spoken interaction, perception of speech sounds and production skills, reading contexts and purposes, writing challenges for advanced learners, and technology and language skills.

The chapters presented in this volume are addressed to researchers and classroom teachers, specialists in Language Education, Philology and Applied Linguistics as well as to graduate students involved in the study of learning and teaching of language skills. They have been written by a group of experienced international specialists in second/foreign language teaching and learning whose intention was to share the results of their investigations with all those interested in the area. The particular chapters seek to provide readers with a broad view on major issues or more specific problems raised in empirical studies so that they can reflect on the many theoretical and practical issues concerning more traditional as well as innovative approaches to language skills instruction. Essentially, the volume can be recommended to anyone who wants to delve into the complexity of dealing with the issue of language skills both on theoretical and practical grounds so as to expand their knowledge or reconsider their views.

The introductory chapter in Section One by Dakowska deals with the fundamental elements of the issue and by taking an evolutionary perspective delineates three main stages in the development of scientific basis for understanding language skills: the philological, linguistic and psycholinguistic ones. The author argues that the impact from psycholinguistics on the developments of the area over the last four decades has been profound, bringing into focus the aspects of modality, cue integration, communicative constraints, as well as the role of meaning, domain-specific context and expertise. Tracing the change in the conceptualization of language skills, Sick-Piskozub explores the concepts of communicative competence and a more currently developed intercultural communicative competence. Pointing out the limitations of the former, the author underscores the fact that, in view of the Intercultural Theory of Language Education, an innovative approach to language skills is to be taken. Teaching language speakers primarily how to understand and interact with representatives of a new cultural environment is a challenge for present-day language education specialists. A description of another changing perspective concerning the conceptualization of
language skills comes from the chapter by Nizgorodcew, devoted to the development of English for Academic Purposes skills. The researcher claims that what is innovative in the EAP approach is treating language as a lingua franca, taking a discourse analytic view, as well as a sociocultural approach emphasizing students’ participation in academic communities. Some pedagogical implications are suggested. Drawing on insights developed in teaching other-than-language domains, such as music and sport, a novel way of approaching foreign language instruction is proposed by Johnson in the next chapter in this section. The author suggests that the procedures employed by teachers of artistic or technical skills, which, like language use, involve simultaneous control of a set of sub-skills, might support the process of L2 learning, and facilitate the transformation of learners’ declarative into procedural knowledge to a greater extent than it has been thought possible so far.

Ellis’s account of the study of elementary level learners’ speaking skills investigated against attainment targets as expressed in the Common European Framework of Reference begins a set of papers on spoken interaction. It is followed by a report of classroom-based research by Guz and Steinbrich into different types of discourse triggered by speaking tasks which, when used in parallel, might adversely affect the learners’ developing competence. Finally, speaking as well as listening skills examined from the perspective of Content and Language Integrated Learning come into focus in an article by Papaja who provides evidence that the study of different school subjects through the medium of English contributes positively to learners’ progress in oracy skills development. Concluding the section addressing spoken interaction issues is an article by Foster which provides a criticism of a common perception of classroom interaction as making the main or the most substantial contribution to the development of knowledge and skills of foreign language learners. The author argues that preoccupation with interaction, with other forms of practice being undervalued, and in consequence underrepresented in classroom teaching, L2 instruction is likely to be incomplete and run counter to learners’ needs and expectations.

Section Three of the present work brings together empirically-oriented articles which acknowledge the significance of the phonological component in the development of oral production skills. In the first article, Nowacka provides interesting insights about the relationship between pronunciation and speaking, specifically concentrating in her analyses on the usefulness of a prepared talk for improvement of both phonetic ability and oral proficiency of L2 learners. This is followed by a report on an investigation into pronunciation learning strategies in the area of vowel
perception and production in controlled and free speaking tasks by Rokoszewska, pointing to the positive impact of strategy training on the quality of oral performance. The article by Szpyra-Kozłowska and Radomski offers an account of an inquiry into the most salient phonetic properties of foreign-accented Polish as perceived by native Poles with the view to identifying the key components of effective instruction programmes for foreigners. In a similar vein, but taking the perspective of native speakers of English, Bryła-Cruz discusses the problem of accentedness in the speech of Polish learners, identifies major problems and suggests areas of priority in teaching Scottish English to Poles. Finally, in an attempt to establish to what extent musical aptitude facilitates the mastery of L2 pronunciation, Niedźwiedź looks at the role of this attribute in accurate perception of aspects of L2 phonology in isolation and in casual connected speech, and suggests some vital implications for the content of pronunciation training sessions, taking also the demands of real-life communication into account.

The fourth section takes a closer look at some issues arising in connection with different purposes for which reading skills are used and a variety of contexts in which they are implemented. In the first chapter Chodkiewicz argues that attempts at the enhanced understanding of the concept of ‘reading to learn’ have not only helped to reinterpret the relationship between ‘learning to read’ and ‘reading to learn’ but also to broaden the scope of interest in the multi-aspectual nature of text processing and the development of L2 reading competence. Also recent L2 reading compensatory models are found to be particularly influential in reconsidering the role of such variables as L1 reading ability, L2 language proficiency, background knowledge, and reader strategies. The two other chapters in the section are accounts of empirical studies. Koziół’s study aimed to determine whether there are gender differences in reading attitudes among school-age children and to evaluate the relationship between ability and attitude in reading so as to ensure better assistance to boys and girls in school reading practice. Świątek’s contribution of research findings is a result of the analysis of reading skills among L2 Polish subjects at the intermediate level, in particular the comparison of the use of three strategies of text-based questioning. The last chapter in this section by Surdacka focuses on an instructional procedure of collaborative retranslation which seems a viable way of promoting linguistic consciousness-raising as well as enhancing text processing skills and thus may positively affect L2 learners’ reading and writing abilities.

In the foreground of the papers in the next section of the present publication are pertinent problems that advanced writers struggle with on
their way to attaining both expertise and writing competence in a chosen academic discipline as well as the control of a foreign language in its formal academic variety. The section opens with a contribution by Krzemińska-Adamék which discusses an important indicator of skilled writing, namely lexical richness, interpreted as sophistication and diversity of lexis in students’ texts, and how it evolves over time. The lexical dimension of writing is also the object of investigation of an article by Guz, which explores the sources of non-academic and non-native-like quality of undergraduate writing, by analysing lexical patterns in students’ texts. The role of conventional lexico-grammatical formulas in academic genres is further addressed by Steinbrich who investigates academic instructors’ and students’ perceptions of value of selected academic phrases for the production of effective discourse. Following the three papers with a lexical focus, Trepczyńska’s article offers a broader reflection on the phenomenon of plagiarism in student academic writing and shows that it is a multi-faceted problem of diverse roots and as such escaping universal and straightforward solutions.

The articles in the last section of this volume are centred on the theme of the use of modern technology in the service of language skills development. In the first article, Kotuła outlines the pedagogical value of digital computer games for the mastery of a variety of competences that are key to effective language use as well as discusses the impact of the technological advancements on the class environment and the nature of classroom interaction. In the next paper, analysing an example computer software – E-Academy of the Future, Krajka uncovers a range of dilemmas, challenges and compromises inherent in the process of designing multimedia programmes for receptive skills training. Maryniak’s paper begins with an overview of different forms of technology-supported learning, following which, it focuses more closely on the possibilities offered by the use of audiobooks, including graded readers, in reading instruction. Next, taking general issues involved in test development as a point of departure, Malec’s contribution demonstrates the potential benefits and limitations of on-line language skills assessment. Beltran-Palanques’ article, which comes next, begins with an overview of theoretical constructs of communicative competence that evolved over the years. Subsequently, taking as his point of reference one of the recent models that stresses the role of skill integration in building L2 learners’ communicative competence, the author goes on to suggest practical ideas involving the use of modern communication and information technologies for the teaching of the four language skills. Finally, the article by Çetinavci and Kartal sheds light on how the employment of modern
information and communication technologies in autonomous out-of-class learning can enhance the development of receptive and productive language skills.
SECTION ONE

FUNDAMENTAL BACKGROUND ISSUES
CHAPTER ONE
EVOLUTION IN UNDERSTANDING
THE NOTION OF LANGUAGE AS SKILL
IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE DIDACTICS

MARIA DAKOWSKA

Abstract

The purpose of the chapter is to outline the evolution which has taken place in the past decades in our understanding of the nature of language as skill and its impact on various conceptions and procedures in foreign language teaching. Although implications can be seen for teaching various foreign languages, I focus on English as a foreign language with its uses and functions in the modern globalized world. The ultimate question to be asked is: a) has this evolution brought progress in our understanding of the nature of language relevant to the discipline of foreign language learning and teaching, and b) has it advanced our orientation in options and strategies of developing foreign language as skill in the educational setting.

1. Introduction

This chapter presents the evolution in our understanding of the nature of language as skill as three stages which span the end of the 19th century and the turn of the 21st century. Further, it examines some selected conceptualizations of the term ‘language skill’ and lists the differences between experts and novices in skilful language use. The tendency toward an increasingly realistic treatment of language as skill is illustrated by a contrast between characteristic features of the graphemic and the phonemic sub-codes in language use for comprehension and production. Such a specific, psycholinguistic understanding can be regarded as an ‘empirical anchor’ in modeling non-primary language use.
and learning in the context of verbal communication, useful as the basis for systematizing strategies of teaching foreign language skills in the educational context.

2. Three stages in the evolution of understanding language as skill in the field of foreign language didactics

Taking into account such criteria as the socioeconomic situation, the state of technology and the purposes for which English as a foreign language is used, learned and taught, three stages can be distinguished in the evolving conceptions of language as skill:

1) the philological stage;
2) the linguistic stage; and
3) the psycholinguistic stage (early, middle, and present).

Stages two and three deserve a closer inspection in that the ideas on the development of foreign language skills have been derived from increasingly solid scientific bases, such as linguistics and psycholinguistics, as well as from research on second/foreign language learning. The psycholinguistic stage, which spans at least four decades, emphasizes the uniqueness of the phonemic and graphemic sub-codes in comprehension and production, modality-specific considerations relevant from the perspective of the language learner, the characteristic seepage of various cues – such as linguistic, para- and non-linguistic – in the process of language use as skill, the role of communicative constraints in language use, and last but not least, the centrality of meaning, especially domain-specific content and expertise (c.f. Gernsbacher 1994; Gaskell 2007).

Table 1–1. Essential characteristics of the three stages in understanding foreign language skills (based on Dakowska 2001; 2003; 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The philological stage</th>
<th>The linguistic stage mid 20th C</th>
<th>The psycholinguistic stage turn of the 21st C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• early industrial society;</td>
<td>• late industrial society;</td>
<td>• information/global society;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• language use for (elite) educational purposes (reading);</td>
<td>• language use for extensive interpersonal/intercultural communication;</td>
<td>• language use for extensive interpersonal, intercultural and global communication;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• interpersonal communication of a limited kind, i.e. restricted in terms of space and intensity;</td>
<td>• the growth of mass media, communication technology and fast transit for extensive mass mobility;</td>
<td>• further growth of mass media and spread of the Internet, which beats space and time in verbal communication;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- printed and spoken input in the target language; mainly philological inspirations, classical texts in teaching;
- the knowledge of language understood as the knowledge of grammar rules and the ability to understand texts;
- the ability to understand texts treated as the ability of translating them into the native language;
- translation for the purpose of semantizing in reading comprehension;
- foreign language teaching based on descriptive and normative grammar, informal observations and common-sense principles.

- language input from the printed and spoken sources, but enriched with the discourse of the media;
- focus on colloquial language;
- definitions of language and learning derived from linguistics and psychology;
- clash between habit formation and rule learning;
- search for ideal methods of foreign language teaching;
- emphasis on language teaching rather than learning, including the four language skills;
- hotly-debated issues: primacy of speech, the pre-reading, or silent period, the role of silent reading versus reading aloud,
- are skills really passive?
- the concept of a common core of the four language skills;
- skill-oriented activities from a structural syllabus;
- beginnings of psycholinguistic research of language skills;
- the field of foreign language teaching seen as methodology.

- the status of English as a world language for global communication, justifying its learning for specialized, professional, expertise-demanding purposes (ESP);
- progress in understanding verbal communication as a psychological and sociological phenomenon, including cross-cultural and global communication in its various situational contexts;
- advances in the psycholinguistic understanding of comprehension and production in the four language skills in L1 and L2;
- understanding of the relationship between language and its use in various sub-codes thanks to research on the deaf, blind and dyslexics;
- the notion of meta-modal representations underlying individual skills;
- an emerging academic discipline of foreign language learning and teaching, called foreign language didactics.
3. Habit, skill and drill

During the audiolingual period, the dominating slogan of the day was the notion that language is a system of habits, i.e. non-reflective language use with ease and fluency. Habits were developed in line with the psychological principles of behaviourism while the ideas regarding the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, were derived from the grammatical syllabus based on structural linguistics. The notions of habit and skill coexisted peacefully but were not sufficiently distinguished from each other. Habits were supposed to be developed by means of practice, which was an integral part of the audiolingual teaching strategies mentioned in one breath with drill, imitation, and pattern practice (Rivers 1964). Drill, imitation, and repetition are overlapping terms referring to the typical audiolingual exercises. Drill seems to be an imitative activity aimed at fast practice, imitation is an act of copying some source material, e.g. a dialogue, and repetition is a recursive activity which involves doing the task (of whatever nature) more than once.

A typical audiolingual exercise combines elements of drill, imitation, and repetition: the brisk pace of the activity, limited amount of the learner’s contribution, and repetition to the point of overlearning. Drill lost the popularity in the foreign language classroom which it used to enjoy in the audiolingual era. The problem with the use of drill seems to be the unrealistic expectations connected with it on the one hand, and the position of drill vis a vis other components of communicative practice. Audiolinguists treated drill as a manipulative activity helpful in establishing the desired language habits, tantamount to the mastery of language. The material was of sentence-length, not discourse, with little context for the forms to be learned, i.e. not meaningful and often insufficiently understood by the learner. The purpose of drills was to help the learner to acquire grammar to the point of being able to use it automatically, i.e. fast. The pace of practice was essential for the success of learning. However, this function of drill is infeasible from our present point of view because the material which is meaningless and insufficiently understood cannot be remembered, not to mention automatized and used in unpredictable situations.

The next point is that fluent, i.e. skilful language use cannot be mastered merely by echoing, manipulating, or otherwise inculcating ready sentences produced by someone else. We must produce them ourselves, from scratch, in order to experience the decision-making process which goes together with language use in a dynamic communicative environment. In a drill, the learner tries to retain this ready material in his
or her working memory only to the extent to which it is necessary to reproduce it immediately (Levelt 1975), whereas in speaking the language user performs many demanding decisions and operations to construct an utterance: he or she constructs the communicative intention to be expressed, the style in which it is to be expressed, selects a sentence plan to convert the thought into an utterance, inserts the lexical material and adjusts elements to fit the whole (Levelt 1989). Following the recognition of the weaknesses of the audiolingual approach, researchers and teachers in the field of English as a foreign language realized that language is a complex skill which is not to be confused with habit and which cannot be developed by means of drills. What makes a skill difficult is not performing its single component, but the integration of all of the components in fractions of seconds. Fluent speakers perform all these operations with ease, but their skill is the effect of practice and expertise, accomplished by painstaking attempts, filled with hesitations, effort and trials in various contexts and dynamic combinations. The benefits of drill sessions, on the other hand, materialize as improved pronunciation at best, but they cannot accelerate the development of the speaking skill. Drill may be recommended as a form of rhythm and pronunciation practice which helps the learner to consolidate the articulatory operations involved in producing phonemes at the level of clauses. This is qualitatively different from using drill to master language as skill.

Repetition is a kind of imitation, which may occur in two varieties: a) as imitation of one’s own utterance, or b) as imitation of the material provided externally. Self-imitation, or saying one’s own utterance again aloud or silently, is very common both in infancy and later in life, during deliberate study, when it serves as rehearsal for consolidation. Rehearsal is a mechanical strategy for repeating the material to be learned as input to working memory, which strengthens its trace in our long-term memory. Repetition may also serve the purpose of consolidating either the motor aspect of behaviour being practiced or the information contents committed to memory. It is necessary in a wide array of skill-demanding activities. Its role in foreign language learning may be defended on the grounds that only rote repetition is useless and hard to turn into a lasting memory trace, whereas the repetition of meaningful material, especially the material which the learner himself or herself has generated, is essential in developing fluency and accuracy. Meaningless repetition is a common activity which can be found in various drill routines of audiolingualism, yet in Communicative Language Teaching it is openly contested as going against the grain of the principle of information gap (Dakowska 2005).
4. Key contributions to conceptualizing the notion of skill

Fitts (1964) was one of the first authors in the field of language learning to identify three stages of acquiring a skill: 1) the cognitive stage, in which the learner makes the initial approximation of the skill-demanding task, based on background knowledge, observation and instructions; 2) the associative stage, in which the task is consolidated while some errors are eliminated; and 3) the autonomous stage, in which the skill is gradually established and improved. In 1968, Welford 1968 published a classical volume on general mental and sensory-motor skills accounting for factors which make up expert, rapid and accurate performance. Most importantly, he situated his model in the context of human information processing especially such sub-systems in this mechanism as perception from our sensory organs, short-term memory, long-term store, control of response and performance. In his conception, skill involves decision-making, i.e. selection and coordination, or integration, a highly constructive, flexible form of behaviour.

Especially significant from the point of view of foreign language learning and teaching is the contribution to our understanding of the nature of language use as skill made by Herriot (1970), first and foremost his explicit distinction between the linguist’s perspective of language as a formal system external to the user and the user’s perspective of language as interpersonal behaviour, i.e. communication. He blames linguists for inserting their formal system external to the user to represent the user and opposed ‘any effort to install linguists’ models of language as models of psychological processes’ (Herriot 1970, 18). Language behaviour has the following properties of skilled behaviour:

a) the hierarchical nature (skills consist of hierarchies and sub-hierarchies of operations which must be integrated by language users to keep pace with the fluency demands;
b) some criterion of success (a norm or target); and
c) automatization, anticipation and feedback.

Legge and Barber (1976) point out such properties of general skills which are practised, yet flexible tasks: the role of coordination of the activity, the incorporation of feedback, on-line planning and, still underestimated in the field of language learning and teaching, the information base of skill. They stress the need to incorporate accuracy into skill practice, a significant point in view of the danger of fossilization in second/foreign language learning. Their conception features a cardinal aspect of the nature of language use as skill, namely the selection processes on the part of the language users, i.e. the choices they make.
from among the available options represented mentally in order to construct a unit of activity in language use. Moreover, their conception entails the notion of target tasks in the sense of some intended norm for the language operations which guides the user’s behaviour. Among the factors conducive to skill learning are guidance by a more experienced person, feedback availability and incorporation, some change in the information basis as well as organization of skill, which could now be called restructuring (McLaughlin 1990).

4.1. Levelt’s conception of language as skill (focus on speaking)

A classic in the research on language as skill is Levelt (1975; 1978; 1989). In his ground-breaking article he pointed out (Levelt 1975, 57):

One of the most general features of complex tasks is their HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE. This means that the task consists of sub-tasks, sub-sub-tasks, etc. The idea is that execution of one part of the task requires the completion of various smaller operations in accurate temporal integration. Each of these operations may in its turn require a set of still more elementary operations, etc. Speaking is an excellent example of hierarchical task structure. There is the first order goal to express a certain intention. In order to realize this, one has to do various things, such as for instance, deciding on topic and new comment to be made, and selecting a certain syntactic schema. In its turn, the realization of this schema requires sub-activities like formulating successive phrases which can express different parts of the intention. Within these phrases word retrieval operations have to be executed until the phrase is completed. But each word in its turn has to be realized phonetically by the activation of articulatory patterns, etc. After completion of lower level tasks control must be returned to higher levels, consequent selection of the next phrase, and so on. In short, the hierarchical nature of complex tasks requires the existence of PLANS or programs for their execution.

The creation of such plans or programs consumes large amounts of effort. Planning a subtask means retrieving from memory the necessary information (about present and desired state, about rules for achieving the desired result, etc.). During this planning, partial results may have to be kept in STM in order to stay available for successful execution of later operations. ...One of the most important characteristics of skill is that the creation of plans during performance is reduced to a bare minimum. The skilful performer has these plans available in long-term memory. This is especially the case for lower-level plans, such as articulatory patterns for words, phrase structures, intonation patterns and so on. Plans which have become part of the more permanent cognitive outfit of a person, are said to be automated. The acquisition of skill consists essentially of automation of
low level plans or units of activity. Initially the execution of such a unit of activity requires the allocation of a large amount of mental effort, since it has to be designed anew.

Furthermore, the author (Levelt 1978) enumerated the following distinctive features of language as skill:

a) hierarchical organization, i.e. higher order, more important decisions influence the subordinated, lower-order choices; this implies the ability to integrate tasks and sub-tasks within one episode of activity;

b) hybrid (i.e. mixed) processing, i.e. the higher-order choices, more significant because related to the communicative intention, are slower and controlled by our attentional resources, while the lower-order subordinated ones, related to formulation (i.e. planning and lexical insertion) and articulation, are performed in fractions of seconds (they are too fast to be controlled by our attentional resources or to be available to our awareness); automaticity in processing, i.e. limited demand on the processing resources, calls for the activation of procedural representations;

c) language use as skill is an act of composing, which requires not only the acquisition of the complex nature of tasks, but also the ability to act in a largely unpredictable and changing environment in which the speaker of a language has to keep track of the ongoing communication, plan and execute his or her utterance, comprehend the intention of the interlocutor and plan ahead.

A distinctive feature of Levelt’s psycholinguistic view of language as skill, which should not be underestimated from the teaching perspective, is entailed in the following statement, in which he breaks down the notion of language skill into skill-specific subsystems, i.e. processing components and representations which are inextricable from the language user:

Developing a theory of any complex cognitive skill requires a reasoned dissection of the system into subsystems, or processing components. It also requires a characterization of the representations that are computed by these processors and of the manner in which they are computed, as well as specification of how these components cooperate in generating their joint end product (Levelt 1989, 1).

4.2. Experts versus novices in language use as skill

In view of the above, experts in the use of skills can be contrasted with novices on the basis of such criteria as fluency of their performance,
degree of accuracy, certainty regarding forms, meta-cognitive regulation of their performance, the awareness of the global target model for the performance, and the use of elaborate forms.

Table 1–2. Polarizing skill differences between experts and novices in language tasks (Anderson 1981)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPERTS</th>
<th>NOVICES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. are characterized by fluent performance</td>
<td>1. by more hesitant performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. accurate performance in the sense of a rather limited number of errors</td>
<td>2. distinctly more errors in their performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. display certainty regarding the forms</td>
<td>3. lack of certainty regarding language forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. longer, more developed/elaborated tasks</td>
<td>4. shorter, more laconic tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. strategies and metacognitive regulation</td>
<td>5. strategies still to be developed; resources unavailable for metacognitive regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. mental global model, or standard</td>
<td>6. insufficient or missing model or standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. deeper processing, more critical evaluation of the task.</td>
<td>7. surface processing, focus on local aspects of the task.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Toward a sufficiently specific understanding of the concept

Defining the concept of language as skill relevant from the point of view of foreign didactics calls for a realistic context of language use for communicative purposes, so that the vast potential of the notion of language can be limited to what people (language learners, language users) really do in sociocultural situations. Therefore, such a definition can be situated:

a) within the natural constraints of language use in verbal communication for the purpose of influencing others; i.e. the central role of meaning (content and expertise) in the context of humanly feasible encounters, relationships and situations;
b) as an inalienable property of language users, i.e. human subjects including their mental and sociocultural environment; i.e. the ubiquity of top-down and bottom-up interactions between the processing subjects and their environment;
c) whole-person involvement in verbal communication, which is to say that language users tap all their resources and mental capacities for communicative situations, such as their cognitive system, emotions, volition, imagination, imagery, language and body language, visual and analogical information processing, personal culture, etc.;

d) sufficiently specific for the purpose of TEFL, i.e. sensitive to modality-specific considerations; focus on the sub-codes and their distinctive features (see table below).

Table 1–3. Differences between the graphemic and the phonemic subcodes in language use (Dakowska 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The graphemic sub-code</th>
<th>The phonemic sub-code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>– writing develops in space</td>
<td>– listening develops in time, i.e. the spoken message is transient; therefore, the learner must contend with his or her working memory constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– the text is permanent, i.e. the learner can read at his or her own pace as well as re-read and go up and down the page</td>
<td>– however, the listener can use numerous contextual/situational clues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– language forms are presented explicitly, as discrete elements</td>
<td>– when we have eye contact with the interlocutor, there are ample non-verbal clues available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– some structuring (organization) of the message comes from punctuation</td>
<td>– the message is structured (i.e. organized into clauses) by prosody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– additional, para- and non-verbal clues are available in typography and illustrations</td>
<td>– however, speaking involves co-articulation, hesitations and various imperfections in planning, an extra burden for the language learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– the level of formality depends on the communicative situation</td>
<td>– the level of formality depends on the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– writing allows for a considerable degree of propositional embedding</td>
<td>– listening is constrained by our working memory limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– because of its permanence, writing is often used for propositionally complex specialized content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.1. Language skill in the cycle of language use  
(knowledge, skill, discourse)

The term ‘cycle’ means that the episodes of communication are recursive: a full cycle involves the sender’s intention reaching the addressee to be reconstructed in his or her mind as well as a response on the part of the addressee reaching the sender’s mind to be reconstructed and evaluated. Each individual is equipped to take both the role of the sender (producer) and comprehender (addressee), whereas their communicative intentions are largely determined by their knowledge, goals, previous exchanges as well as the entire context of the situation. Since people enter communicative encounters in some social roles with agendas and expectations, their communicative intentions are determined by these social roles, identities, motives, and desires. Therefore, it is necessary to posit, both for the sender and the addressee, the appropriate representations in their minds required in verbal communication, that is a) language as knowledge – a distributed propositional as well as declarative and procedural networks of mental representations; b) language use as skill, a complex form of behaviour which enables the communicating person to integrate hierarchically organized choices from among various representations, and their execution in the form of speaking or writing, and c) language product in the form of discourse, i.e. linear encoding of our communicative intention in the form of an utterance or written text.

To sum up, knowledge refers to the vastly distributed mental networks, hierarchies and systems of information, activated in encoding and decoding communicative intentions. It includes a variety of representations: words in our mental lexicon categorized from the point of view of form, associations and meaning, modality specific representations, declarative and procedural records, syntagmatic and paradigmatic representations, (preverbal) plans, schemata, scenarios, scripts, conventions and rules, as well as models of culture-specific discourse genres. Knowledge may be fuzzy and poorly organized, and therefore harder to access, as much as well-organized and explicit, and thus more easily accessible and available for verbalization.

In this context, the notion of language use as skill has been defined as a behavioural category denoting a hierarchical integration of communicative choices which enable the language user to resort to controlled processes for the strategically more important decisions and execute them with the help of subordinated automatic processes. Automatization of lower-level choices helps the language user to keep pace with the communicative fluency demands. Both the lexical material as well as the syntagmatic
Evolution in Understanding the Notion of Language as Skill

plans and other linear arrangements are activated in converting the intention into discourse. The choices that the speaker makes must be implemented in fractions of seconds. The qualitative difference between knowledge in the sense of mental representations and skill as a behavioural category is not only in the ability of the language user to retrieve the required information from memory, but first of all, the ability – within the constraints of his or her working memory – to integrate the necessary operations in time to control the composing activity and regulate its course/direction. The lower-level choices must be automatic to free the attentional resources for the more ambitious and demanding level of the task. The learner’s route to automatization is via practice and it has its own progression identified by Fitts (1964) as the declarative, associative and autonomous stages. The difficulty of developing skills in foreign language learning results from the fact that the integration and automaticity necessary in skilled language use are developed via flexible adjustable acts of composing utterances, i.e. they must be practiced in countless communicative tasks which take time, in contrast to rigid language drills aimed at fixed grammatical forms, taken out of their communicative environment. Skill acquisition requires relevant models of behaviour, practice, imitation and repetition, rehearsal, deliberate planning, integration, whole-part task strategy, feedback incorporation, etc., provided the material is communicatively relevant and the unit of activity is sufficiently sizeable to be stored as a communicative event, which is to say, it must have an episodic structure of a meaningful communicative task.

Discourse is the tangible, and even permanent language product of encoding in verbal communication and may even be recorded in a form more permanent than the auditory one. The distinctive property of this natural unit of verbal communication is the unity of the communicative intention, constructed by the sender and directed at the addressee, as well as its deep embeddedness in the situational context by means of reference and deixis. Discourse hangs together because of its coherence and cohesion, i.e. topical connectivity and prosodic, morphosyntactic and lexical suprasentential devices which retain the links between the new and given information from the speaker’s perspective to hold the thread of discourse together.

From the point of view of the needs of language learners, the most important function of discourse is that of language input, i.e. the source of information on how competent speakers code their communicative intentions into target language forms and do this intelligibly as well as idiomatically in situational contexts. More specifically, target language
discourse is a model and a source of knowledge about discourse genres, i.e. culturally-specific discourse types with their domain terminology, structure and characteristic coherence and cohesion devices. Practising discourse production must entail the experience of using the coherence and cohesion devices accurately over some communicative distances within the working memory constraints. Discourse is not only an outcome of communicative processes, the effect of language production and the material for comprehension, but also the material for study and reasoning. It may be taken apart and put back together again, the underlying plan may be inferred and reconstructed with a view to its conventions. Lexical units of various sizes may be perceived, semanticized, elaborated, systematized and learned in connection with it. The ability to produce discourse may be developed with the use of models for imitation, partial imitation, completion and summarizing, parallel writing, analysis and recognition of discourse plans and conventions, as well as in relevant partial tasks which include planning, drafting/rehearsing, editing/feedback incorporation and rewriting/retelling, as well as process writing (Dakowska 2003).

6. Options in developing language skills

The table below systematizes options that are available in the field of foreign language didactics for the development of language use as skill, ensuing from our understanding of this complex, but specific notion:

Table 1–4. Systematizing options of developing EFL skills in the classroom context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Task adjustment strategies</th>
<th>Pre-teaching for the task, orientation/anticipation strategies, no time constraints, compression, elaboration (built-in redundancy), augmentation and salience/prominence given to task elements, etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. learning by observation</td>
<td>source of language knowledge, such as situational discourse models, schemata and scenarios, including lexical material and standards for skill-demanding tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. imitation, i.e. verbatim repetition, of ready tasks</td>
<td>opportunity to coordinate and sustain the production of longer chunks of discourse to “stretch” the limitations of the learner’s working memory and enhance fluency (also see no. 9, fluency work)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>