

Shortcomings of structuralism and behaviorism

The theories underlying the audiolingual method and the situational language teaching were widely criticized during the 1960s. Noam Chomsky, for instance, rejected the structuralist view of language and demonstrated that there is a distinction between performance and competence. The goal of the linguist is to study the linguistic competence native speakers are endowed with. He also showed, rightly, that structuralism and behaviorism were unable to account for one fundamental aspect of language, namely the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences. A child is able to produce an infinite number of sentences that s/he has never encountered. This makes the factors of imitation, repetition, and habit formation weak arguments to account for any language learning theory.

A shift towards communicative proficiency

The increasing interdependency between the European countries necessitated a need for a greater effort to teach adults the principal languages of the continent. New goals were set in language teaching profession:

- The paramount importance of communication aspects of language.
- The increasing interest in meaningful learning.
- The growing centrality of the learner in teaching processes.
- The subordinate importance of structural teaching of language.

Notional / functional dimension of language

Applied linguists and philosophers addressed another fundamental dimension of language: the functional and communicative potential of language. The speech act theory showed that we do something when we speak a language. We use language

- to get things,
- to control behavior,
- to create interaction with others,
- to express personal feelings,
- to learn,
- to create a world of imagination,
- to communicate information.

Besides applied linguists emphasized a teaching of language based on communicative proficiency rather than mastery of structures. Instead of describing the core of language through traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary, they (Van Ek & Alexander, 1975; Wilkins, 1976) attempted to show the systems of meaning underlying the communicative use of language. They described two kinds of meanings.

- Notional categories: concepts such as time, sequence; quantity, location, frequency.
- Functional categories: requests offers, complaints, invitation ...

In other words, a “notion” is a particular context in which people communicate. A “function” is a specific purpose for a speaker in a given context. For example, the “notion,” of *shopping* requires numerous language “functions,” such as *asking about prices or features of a product* and *bargaining*.

One language competence or numerous competences?

For Chomsky, the focus of linguistics was to describe the *linguistic competence* that enables speakers to produce grammatically correct sentences. Dell Hymes held, however, that such a view of the linguistic theory was sterile and that it failed to picture all the aspects of language. He advocated the need for a theory that incorporates *communication competence*. It must be a definition of what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community.

Later Canale and Swaine (1980) described four dimensions of communicative competence.

- Grammatical competence: refers to what Chomsky calls linguistic competence.
- Sociolinguistic competence: refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place (role relationships, shared beliefs and information between participants ...)
- Discourse competence: refers to the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and how meaning is represented in relation to the entire discourse or text.
- Strategic competence: refers to the coping strategies that participants use to initiate terminate, maintain, repair and redirect communication