



Being ‘a competent language user’ in a world of Others – Adult migrants’ perceptions and constructions of communicative competence

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the lived experience of language (Busch, 2017) in relation to perceptions of what it means to be ‘a competent language user’. How to define language competence is an ongoing discussion in applied linguistics. However, relatively little attention has been given to the lived experiences of adult migrants with respect to their perceptions of competence. Drawing on an analysis of focus group discussions with adult migrants enrolled in a language program in basic Swedish, this article builds on understandings of communicative competence as a relational construct shaped by intersubjective processes. Corroborating the relational view of competence is the importance given to emotional perspectives on competence and the role played by assessments, both those made by others and internalized self-assessments. Meanwhile, discourses on the language competence of adult migrants often frame successful language learning as an individual responsibility and achievement, obscuring the relational process underlying the perceptions and constructions of communicative competence.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the lived experience of language (Busch, 2017) in relation to perceptions of communicative competence held by adult migrants in Sweden following a basic course in L2 Swedish. Being considered competent in the receiving country’s official language carries strong symbolic value since it indexes belonging and loyalty to the new country (Blackledge, 2009; Milani, 2008; Rosén & Bagga-Gupta, 2015). Discourses on adult migrants’ language learning often posit that ‘it is a duty’ (e.g. Heberlein, 2017) for migrants to learn the receiving country’s language, attributing a moral valuation to language learning. Competence and successful language learning are constructed as residing within the individual and dependent on the individual’s own responsibility, effort and endless self-improvement, a process Park labelled ‘naturalization of competence’ (2010, p.23). Taken together, this often leads to a view of language learning as a simple ‘matter of individual choice’ (Cooke, 2006, p.60).

In linguistics, ‘competence’ is often associated with Chomsky’s theory (e.g. 1965) as focusing on the abstract knowledge of linguistic structures. In reaction to Chomsky’s narrowly defined notion of competence, Hymes (e.g. 1971, 1972) conceived of the notion of communicative competence, with the aim of developing a soci-

olinguistic theory describing both *knowledge* (grammatical and sociolinguistic) and *ability for use* (including factors like motivation). For Hymes, communicative competence is acquired through socialization, thereby pointing to an underlying relational aspect to communicative competence. Over the years, communicative competence has become a key notion in applied linguistics. In particular the notion has been adopted in language education, although in a narrower sense than Hymes (see McNamara, 1995, and Elder, McNamara, Kim, Pill, & Sato, 2017, and Leung, 2005 for a discussion of the topic). In language teaching and testing, communicative competence and communicative language ability are often described as a set of abilities in general models (e.g. Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2007), leading to a view of competence as a transparent state to be achieved by individual learners. Such a view obscures the contextualized and relational aspect of communicative competence emphasized by Hymes. Furthermore, too strong a focus on communicative competence as an individual ability has often led to a view that communicative competence is something individuals have or lack (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005). Instead, as argued by Kataoka, Ikeda, & Besnier (2013) communicative competence should be considered to be a developmental process located in the interstices between humans, making competence a primarily relational phenomenon. A view of communicative competence as achieved in moment by moment negotiations resonates with newer ways of envisaging language learning and competence in times of globalization and mobility. New notions like *performative competence*

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(Canagarajah, 2013), which highlights the practice-based nature of language and the role of negotiation and meaning-making, or *symbolic competence* (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008), which foregrounds multilingual speakers' use of their linguistic resources to position themselves, find appropriate subject positions and shape the discourse, are examples of how definitions of competence are part of an ongoing debate in educational research and applied linguistics.

It is important to note that communicative competence is not a neutral notion; rather it is influenced and affected by social structures, ideologies and institutions such as the education system. As underscored by Kataoka et al., communicative competence 'invokes dynamics of authenticity, plurality, and mobility' (2013, p. 349), by associating the communicative ability of people with their positions in socio-political systems that include structures of inequality, leading to both inclusion and exclusion. The point to be made here is that for adult migrants, who are not always seen as competent language users, the issue of competence becomes a central concern, and as Park contends, 'competence is used as an extremely pervasive but frequently overlooked index for one's identity and social status' (2010, p. 23). It is therefore of interest to investigate how adult language learners perceive what it means to be 'a competent language user'.

While communicative competence has been extensively discussed in educational research (e.g. Canale & Swain, 1980; Jaffe, 2013; Leung, 2005; Leung & Lewkowicz, 2013; Savignon, 1983) and, to some extent, in everyday and institutional practices (e.g. Briggs, 1988; Besnier, 2013; Elder et al., 2017), less attention has been given to communicative competence as lived experience among adult language learners. Drawing on an analysis of focus group discussions with adult migrants enrolled in a basic L2 Swedish course, this study seeks to unpack competence as a relational construct through the lens of adult language learners' lived experiences of language and their perceptions of competence. By doing so, this study makes the case that perceiving oneself to be 'a competent language user' is dependent on the assessment of others and is therefore a vulnerable subject position.

2. Lived experience of language, intersubjectivity and perceptions of competence

Embodied experiences of being or not being perceived as 'a competent language user' are an important aspect of the development of one's linguistic repertoire. Following Busch (2017), linguistic repertoires are shaped by a subject's lived experience of language, including linguistic resources as well as metapragmatic discourse and emotions. The concept of the lived experience of language is inspired by a phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty, 2009[1945]) and emphasizes how knowledge about the world is gained through our bodily experience of being in the world. From a phenomenological point of view, language is primarily a bodily phenomenon (Ihre, 1973; Merleau-Ponty, 2009[1945]:202–232), and, as stated by Ihre (1973, p. 70), the '[e]mbodied expression is concrete and positional, the place from which one views the world'. Accordingly, the embodied perspective gives privilege to the experiencing subject, his or her life-world, perceptions and emotions. As underscored by Barnacle (2004, p. 65), '[l]ived experience does not designate a subjective or a mental state, but rather, the condition of being in relation (to the Other)'. This resonates with Bakhtin's oft-cited statement that 'language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other' (1981, p. 293). In this light, the lived experience of language is intrinsically shaped in intersubjective processes (Busch 2017).

Use of the term 'intersubjectivity' varies in different research traditions. In ethnomethodology, focusing on *in situ* interaction – intersubjectivity is considered a social and interactional

achievement of a shared understanding. Phenomenology and poststructuralist traditions, on the other hand, have a broader understanding of intersubjectivity as 'a fundamental quality of all kinds of human experiences, including the apparently most individual or private' (Duranti, 2015, p. 209). It refers to the ability to anticipate and incorporate the views of others, and as a 'deep coordination of body and mind, self and other' (Kramsch, 2009, p. 76). In this study, both perspectives are used and come together in the participants' reflections on experiences of situated interactions.

Meanwhile, intersubjective processes are not neutral, but rather, are dependent on power relations leading to a perceived linguistic vulnerability for speakers (Kramsch, 2012). As Bourdieu and Wacquant underscore, '*linguistic relations are always relations of symbolic power*' [italics in original] Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 142), and perceptions of competence play a crucial role in linguistic relations. In essence, experiences of being seen or not seen as 'a competent language user' cannot be separated from subjects' social positions and greater social structures. In Bourdieu's terminology, embodied experiences of linguistic relations and social practices become inscribed in a person's *habitus* – an individual's embodied dispositions. According to Bourdieu (1977), legitimacy concerns the relationship between linguistic resources and the speaker's social position and ability to speak with authority in different social domains, and, as underscored by Park, this 'link between competence and legitimacy makes competence an effective resource for the reproduction of social distinctions' (2010, p. 24). In this vein, being seen as a competent language user is closely associated with being a legitimate language user.

A particular practice in which both perceptions and constructions of competence, as well as power relations and distinctions, are made salient is assessments. Educational settings are an important arena for assessments with explicit statements in syllabuses, grading criteria and recurrent assessment practices. However, assessments do not take place only in educational settings, but also occur in everyday practices. How our linguistic resources are assessed play a significant role in how we are perceived and perceive ourselves as speakers and how we are positioned in the world. All language assessments have the capacity to function as a 'two-edged sword' (McNamara, 2012, p. 576) with the possibility of excluding as well as including, making distinction an inevitable consequence of assessments. As Busch (2017) suggests, it is often in relation to lived experiences of exclusion, i.e. when we are not seen as a legitimate or competent language user, that linguistic resources and the value attached to them are made salient. In this light, perceptions of competence are grounded in social experience and are shaped by assessments made by ourselves and others.

3. Research context, data and method

The data for this study consist of six focus group discussions conducted at two learning centres with students following the final course² in a basic program in L2 Swedish called *Swedish for Immigrants* (henceforth SFI). SFI is divided into four courses ranging from a new beginner level up to an intermediate level (the final course being approximately equivalent to B1/B1+ on the CEFR-scale, Council of Europe, 2001).

3.1. Research context

SFI is a state-subsidized language program for adult migrants in Sweden. In 2015, 138 000 students were enrolled in SFI. Due to an increased migration to Sweden, SFI has become an important part of the Swedish education system and the number of students in SFI has increased year by year: compared to 2006, student numbers have doubled (National Agency for Education, 2016). Time and

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