What is the advanced oral proficiency level in English as a Second Language (ESL)?

Kenji Abe, Ed.D.

桐蔭横浜大学医用工学部

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1. Introduction

As is pointed out by Mohle(1985) , in the field of ESL, a considerable number of studies are devoted to basic and intermediate levels while advanced levels are rarely the objective of research. Partly because of this, the criteria for the advanced level ESL learners still remain ambiguous. There are cases in which research papers which advocate covering advanced level ESL learners actually deal with intermediate level learners. In Mohle's words, "a designation such as advanced level poorly describes the level of language mastery it is intended for" (p. 233). Considering the substantial effects of this issue on future research in second language learning, it is considered necessary to clarify the criteria which describe the characteristics of advanced level ESL speakers.

2. Method

Mohle (1985) says, "From the teacher's point of view...language proficiency is usually assessed according to criteria which stress correctness and range of expression"(p. 234). In order to confirm this, the researcher conducted a preliminary survey with five ESL instructors regarding their judgments about advanced ESL level. All five are veteran ESL instructors with more than 10 years of experience for the same ESL program at a private university in California. The following questionnaire was sent to each instructor by e-mail, and the answers were sent back to the researcher by e-mail likewise:

Questionnaire

A) Please indicate the number of the years that you have taught ESL for.
B) If you had to mention three standards for advanced ESL speakers, what would they be, and why ? Please place them in order from highest to lowest. In other words, what type of English would an ESL speaker need to speak in order to impress you as advanced level ESL speakers outside classroom?

Kenji Abe,Ed.D.：Department of Biomedical Engineering, Toin University of Yokohama, 1614 Kurogane-cho, Aoba-ku, Yokohama, Japan 225-8503

C) If you had to choose, which criterion do you think is more important for an ESL speaker to be judged as advanced level; natural and automatic use of English, or slow but careful use of English with grammatically elaborate sentences and academic vocabulary? In other words, which of these two do you place more emphasis on in your ESL class room? Automatic and natural use of English with occasional roughness in expressions, or correct and appropriate use of formal English? If your answer is different from either choice, please describe it in your own words.

3. Results

The results were not exactly as Mohle indicated. They were split into two types. Two instructors answered grammatical accuracy, level of formality, articulate syntax, and natural rhetoric as their top criteria for the advanced level. The other two answered fluency, clear pronunciation, and good listening comprehension at the top. One responded that she could not answer the questions, because it depends on what the language is used for. If the ESL speaker is in a professional occupation, grammatical accuracy and formality receive more emphasis. On the other hand, if he is a bartender, mere fluency would be enough.

However, what cannot be overlooked is the fact that they often contradicted themselves. One of the first two respondents, in spite of her clear emphasis on grammatical accuracy to Question 2, emphasizes a different aspect of proficiency to Question 3:

Although both grammar and pronunciation must be developed, I place more emphasis on automatic and natural use of English with occasional roughness in expressions…. Correct and appropriate use of formal English can sound unnatural and artificial.

Another instructor also indicated two separate standards depending on the situation:

If talking about advanced use in general. I would choose natural and automatic use. If talking about students doing academic work at the university, I would choose slow but careful use of the language with academic vocabulary. And those are the situations I teach in, so I would choose the latter.

Question 2 and question 3 regard two different situations. The former is regarding outside ESL classroom, and the latter is regarding inside ESL classrooms. Depending on which situation it is, the ESL instructors change their standards between natural fluency and automaticity with occasional roughness and slow but careful use of language with formal academic vocabulary. One instructor could not answer these questions because of two different criteria she switches.

Because of these dual standards, there seems to be certain confusion when they teach English in classroom. One instructor said that depending on the exercises she has her students participate in, she changes her focus. At a glance, this approach seems to be a good idea. Nonetheless, the fact that second language (L2) learners have to divide their attention in two totally different directions remains. It is possible that such a dualism impedes L2 learners' otherwise natural development in ESL.

4. Discussion

4.1 Two types of criteria for judging the advanced oral proficiency level

Are there indeed two different types of mastering a language? Richards (2002) points out this tendency from a pedagogical perspective:

The status of grammar-focused teaching has undergone a major reassessment in the past 25 years. The advent of communicative language teaching ostensibly saw the demise of grammar-based instruction. Grammatical syllabi were superseded by communicative ones based on functions or tasks, such as Presentation-Practice-Production group work. This led to the emergence of a fluency-first pedagogy (Brumfit, 1979), in which priority is given to providing opportunities for information sharing and negotiation of meaning in the classroom, and where students' grammar needs are determined on the basis of their performance on fluency tasks rather than pre-determined by a grammatical syllabus. (p. 35)

Although there are very few studies directly regarding these two separate criteria, there are some studies which deal with issues related to them. Krashen is one of such researchers, and supports fluency-based criteria. Here are two quotes of Krashen. According to Brown (1994):

[A]dult second language learners have two means for internalizing the target language. The first is "acquisition," a subconscious and intuitive process of constructing the system of a language.... The second means is a conscious "learning" process in which learners attend to form, figure out rules, and are generally aware of their own process. "Monitor" is an aspect of this second process; it is a "device" for ... editing and making alterations or corrections as they are consciously perceived. Krahsen claimed that "fluency in second language performance is due to what we have acquired, not what we have learned." (1981a, p. 99)

Brown (1994) continues. Adults should, therefore, do as much acquiring as possible in order to achieve communicative fluency; otherwise they will get bogged down in rule learning and too much conscious attention to the forms of language. According to Krashen (1982), our conscious learning processes and our subconscious acquisition processes are mutually exclusive: learning cannot "become" acquisitions. This claim is used to strengthen the argument for recommending large doses of acquisition activity in the classroom, with only a very minor role assigned to the Monitor. Once fluency is established, only then should optimal amount of Monitoring be employed by the learner.

Krashen says adults should focus on acquisition as much as possible. That is, he emphasizes the importance of fluency in terms of SLA. He also asserts that the conscious process of monitoring should come after fluency is established. It is interesting to see him comment that however many times grammar-based knowledge is used, it will not be developed into fluency, and grammar-based conscious knowledge has a very minor role in oral communication.

Tarone (1984), from a different angle, also

states the idea that the very base of oral communication is fluency:

> Paradigm 3 [of Krashen's idea] views the [second language learner's interlanguage (IL)] system as essentially two independent systems, each of which is apparently homogeneous, and only one of which actually generates utterances.... [T]he learner's implicit knowledge system actually initiates IL utterances in performance. The learner can modify the output of the implicit "grammar" by invoking rules from the metalinguistic knowledge system (the monitor).... [I]t is at times the implicit knowledge system alone which underlies IL behavior, and at times it is the implicit knowledge system modified by the metalinguistic knowledge system which does so. (pp. 17-18)

In this quote, Krashen proposes that the base that communication depends on is fluency, which implicitly initiates utterances. Sometimes monitoring takes place but most of the time communication depends on fluency. Brown and Tarone seem to agree with this Krashen's view.

McLaughlin (1987) also supports the fluency-based criteria in his own way:

Because humans are limited-capacity processors, such a task [as SLA] requires the integration of a number of different skills, each of which has been practiced and made routine.... Automatic processing ... is a learned response that has been built up through the consistent mapping of the same input to the same pattern of activation over many trials. Once learned, an automatic process occurs rapidly and is difficult to suppress or alter. The second mode of information processing, controlled processing is a temporary activation of nodes in a sequence.... Once automatic processes are set up at one stage...controlled processes are free to be allocated to higher levels of processing.... [C]omplex tasks are characterized by a hierarchical structure.... The execution of one part of the task requires the completion of various smaller components. (pp. 134-135)

In other words, since advanced learners have experienced the same activation pattern many times, they are able to do more complex and higher level tasks by automatically processing more parts of their utterances rapidly. McLaughlin, Rossman, and McLeod (1992), by quoting Dornic, confirm this by noticing that speed increases as a function of experience with language and that this is true with respect to both decoding and encoding efficiency. They also state that "this transition from controlled to automatic processing is central to learning" (p. 152).

> Bialystok (1994) says;
> The purpose of the framework is to identify a minimum set of cognitive operations that are responsible for the acquisition and use of language.... The framework is built around two cognitive processing components. The components are called the process of analysis and the process of control. Analysis is the process by which mental representations that were loosely organized around meanings (knowledge of the world) become rearranged into explicit representations that are organized around formal structures.... Relatively unanalyzed representations of language are based

on the meanings and functions of language without concern for how those meanings and functions are signified. Conversation is well served by these representations, but grammatical analysis is not. More analyzed representations are based on such symbolic relations as the connection between letters and sounds in written language. Consequently, a far greater level of analysis is required to support literacy skills than oral uses of language.... In a sense, analysis is the process underlying the phenomenological experience that implicit knowledge become explicit. In this way, explicitness is really a statement about the level of organization in the mental representation.... [C]ontrol is the process of selective attention that is carried out in real time. (pp. 159-160)

Bialystok also adds, "knowledge analyzed... is easily applied to the full range of language uses, from conversation to poetry-writing and attentional control more selective" (p.162). This implies that more advanced L2 learners are, the more explicit knowledge of analysis they have, and, therefore, the more explicit grammatical knowledge they have. Although she also talks about automaticity as the other component in her idea of control, she supports grammar-based criteria as a good indicator for judging advanced levels. This indicates that she asserts that criteria of both fluency and grammar are necessary in order to judge language proficiency levels.

4.2 Inner city African Americans and Japanese

Are grammar and fluency equally important as criteria for judging advanced levels? Let's consider this issue from different angles.

Bialystok says the more advanced L2 learners

become, the more automaticity increases and, at the same time, the more mental representation is analyzed. Is this true? For example, in the case of Japanese learners of English, in spite of their relatively high levels of explicit grammatical knowledge, they cannot communicate in English easily. On the other hand, in the case of inner city African Americans who have not received much formal education in school, in spite of the high levels of grammatical inaccuracy in their English, the high level of its automaticity and systematicity has been reported (Speicher & McMahon, 1992). They are, after all, native speakers of English, and their command of English is highly automatized. However, they do not seem to have high level of analysis, which Bialystok asserts. If they were in ESL classes, how would the above ESL instructors evaluate their English? Are they evaluated as not being advanced level even though English is their mother tongue? And are Japanese learners of English who cannot communicate well orally in spite of a highly analyzed knowledge of English evaluated as being advanced level instead? If native English speakers are not judged to be at advanced level, it means they are judged based on some other human value than simply linguistic. At least, in these two examples, the analysis advocated by Bialystok seems to be an irrelevant criterion for the judgment of advanced levels in ESL.

4.3 Slow and careful use of English with academic vocabulary

In regard to controlled processes, McLaughlin, Rossman, and McLeod (1992) state as follows:

The second mode of information processing, controlled processing, is not a learned response, but a temporary

activation of nodes in a sequence. This activation is under attentional control of the subject and, since attention is required, only one such sequence can normally be controlled at a time without interference.... Controlled processes are thus tightly capacity-limited, and require more time for their activation. But controlled processes have the advantage of being relatively easy to set up, alter, and apply to novel situations. (p.139)

McLead and McLaughlin (1986) add to this, "When skills are not completely automatic, however, performance can be improved by giving the learner more time to apply controlled processes" (p.111). The first quote describes controlled processing as attentional temporary activation of nodes applied to new situations. The second quote says that if it is slow, controlled processing can deal with fairly high level performances. Combining these two, it follows that slow and careful use of English with academic vocabulary can be made even by those who are not necessarily proficient in the language. In other words, analysis by itself is not a good indicator of advanced levels.

4.4 Daily English spoken by native English speakers and L2 learners

First, we look at a short conversation that actually took place between two native English speaking college friends over the phone, which were tape-recorded.

A: Hey, what's up?
B: Not much. Been busy working on the paper I have to hand in on Friday.
A: Yeah? Me too, man. How many pages did you finish?
B: 10.

A: Cool.
B: What about you, man?
A: 5. 'cause you know, I got to work at Subway all weekend. I was so exhausted, and I didn't feel like doing nothing.
B: Yeah, I hear you, man. It's got to be 20 pages, right?
A: Right. I guess I got to go to the library again to pick up some more stuff to get some more pages.
B: Same here. Let's have a party Friday after all this is done, dude.
A: OK, dude. Take care.
B: You too.

Now let's look at a conversation made by L2 learners. This conversation happened during a role-playing task in an ESL secondary school English lesson. One student is playing the role of a doctor and the other a patient, and they are discussing a health problem. Their exact level is not clarified.

A: I'm thirty-four ... thirty-five.
B: Thirty ... five?
A: Five.
B: Problem?
A: I have ... a pain in my throat.
B: [In Spanish: What do you have?]
A: [In Spanish: A pain.] Pain.
B: Ah, pain!
A: Yes, and it makes problems to me when I ... swallow.
B: When do you have ...?
A: Since yesterday morning.
B: [In Spanish: No, I mean, where do you have the pain?] It has pain in ...?
A: In my throat.

The actual quote is longer than this, but this part will serve our purposes. Richards

comments:

Skehan suggests that the level of communication often observed during task work results from students relying on a lexicalized system of communication that is heavily dependent on vocabulary and memorized chunks of language as well as both verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to get meanings across. Accurate use of grammar or phonology is not necessary in such cases. In the example above, for example, one student avoids asking (or does not know how to ask), "What is your problem?" and simply says, "Problem?" (Richards, 2002, p. 39)

Richards criticizes this role-play by ESL speakers, and says that the students are too dependent on limited vocabulary, fixed-phrases, and verbal and non-verbal communication strategies instead of using grammatically appropriate sentences. However, looking at the conversation by native English speakers, we can see that they also depend on limited numbers of vocabulary and short fixed phrases instead of using long grammatical sentences with academic vocabulary. Of course, the levels of language complexity differ between native English speakers and L2 speakers. However, both of them do not seem to necessarily speak highly analyzed grammatical English with academic vocabulary in these examples.

Harley (1995) further adds:
After babbling, development progresses through a one-word stage, a two-word utterance stage, to sentences of increasing length and grammatical complexity. Early speech is telegraphic in that grammatical elements are often omitted. When these emerge, they do so gradually in an order that is largely constant within a language. (p.382)

4.5 What native speakers can do which L2 learners cannot do

According to Vanderplank (1988), listening comprehension is comprised of two processes, "following" (F) and "understanding" (U). He claims that while native speakers can do the patterns, F>U, F<U, F=U, non-native speakers can only do F>U and F=U, meaning that non-native speakers cannot understand types of input which they cannot follow. Along the same line Mendelson (1984) claims that the languages we are proficient in can often be understood even if not every word is available but that non-native speakers feel everything has to be 100% clear. This tendency that non-native speakers cannot understand English message without 100% of the information available to them is considered one of the fundamental differences between native speakers and non-native speakers.

Why does this happen? It happens because L2 learners are all forced to use in their ESL classrooms complete sentence forms with much emphasis on grammatical correctness, structural complexity, and academic vocabulary, with every word they speak clearly pronounced, as if it were in writing, not oral. However, once L2 learners move outside of the classroom, they are faced with much faster input with ambiguous sounds by native English speakers. This fundamental gap between classroom English and real world English is caused by an excessive emphasis in the classroom on grammar-based criteria. Too much emphasis of

linguistic analysis is hindering L2 learners' otherwise natural and smooth language acquisition.

Landolfi (1984) suggests:

> [T]he most important work that a listener can do is to predict what the speaker is likely to say and that prediction of the probable content reduces the student's load to the task of understanding just enough of the language to enable him to match what he thinks the message is against what he already knows.... [A] good listener filters the message for its relevance to his purpose in listening.... 100% comprehension is not even necessary. (p.20)

This means that the communication system of a good listener, such as native English speakers, does not always pay attention to all information available. However, because of the ESL instructors' wrong emphasis on grammatical accuracy and academic language use, which have little to do with the natural communication, L2 learners are systematically deprived of the very opportunities to practice such English of truly oral nature as they have to face outside their classrooms.

5. Conclusion

Points of our discussions are summarized as follows:

1. In spite of relatively high levels of their analytical mental representations of English, typical Japanese learners of English cannot communicate in English very fluently, and, therefore, are clearly not judged as being at advanced level. On the other hand, although they are native speakers of English and thus have a high command of English, typical African Americans in inner cities do not seem to have highly analytical mental representations of English.

2. Slow and careful use of English with academic vocabulary is possible even by those who are not really at advanced level, as long as they have enough time.

3. Even native English speakers do not meet a grammar-based standard when they speak English in informal daily settings. The type of settings which require highly grammatical English with complex sentences and academic vocabulary is very rare in daily life.

4. Because of an excessive emphasis by ESL instructors on grammar-based criteria, L2 learners cannot develop the same natural communication system as native speakers have, by which listening comprehension is normally conducted without depending on all information available.

These four seem to point against grammar-based criteria and, thus, against the idea of analysis advocated by Bialystok (1994) when judging who is at advanced level ESL learners. Rather, placing excessive importance on such artificial formal skills seems to impede L2s from establishing the same communication system as what native English speakers have. This makes it more difficult for L2 learners to develop and establish automaticity in the use of English.

Harley (1995) states:

> [T]here are cognitive cycles in the planning of speech. In particular, phases of highly hesitant speech alternate with phases of more fluent speech; the

hesitant phases also contain more filled pauses, and more false starts than the fluent phases. It is thought that most of the planning takes place in the hesitant phase, and in the fluent phase we merely say what we have just planned in the preceding hesitant phase. (p.248)

If we combine this Harley's proposition with McLaughlin's idea (1987) that speed and automaticity increase as a function of experience with language, the advanced level L2 speaker is considered to have faster and longer fluent phases, which are executed naturally without conscious monitoring. And this is considered the more appropriate criteria for judging advanced levels. And this is what ESL instructors should pay more attention to in their L2 classrooms in order to lead their students to the advanced level.

The level of analysis proposed by Bialystok (1994), which indicates the grammar-based command of language, is not a good indicator of the advanced level, as opposed to the presumption by so many ESL instructors. Even native English speakers do not necessarily meet this criterion. Grammar-based use of language represents just one of many artificial features of our language use. Thus, it is wrong to place emphasis on this particular style before L2 learners' natural communication system is actually established. Grammar analysis has little to do with leading L2 learners to develop the natural communication system which will enable them to communicate naturally as they do in their L1. If such a specific feature of language use is to be paid attention to, it has to be after L2 learners have firmly established their communication system, not simultaneously. In the process of establishing their natural communication system, L2 learners must focus on it without any distraction. In order to establish a communication system similar to that of native speakers', they need more opportunities in which they can freely test what they are yet to master without worrying about making mistakes. Excessive emphasis on correct forms in L2 classroom blocks their natural communicative developments.

Automaticity, rather than controlled correctness is more important in terms of judging the advanced level. Automatic, natural, and quick use of English with occasionally rough and broken features is what is indeed needed in daily communications. The mastery of the language is the most critical problem that L2 learners have to face to survive in English speaking environment. It is wrong that ESL instructors bring a specific social value into their classroom, where L2 learners are seriously trying to master their survival skills. It will substantially hinder them from becoming independent members of the society. The primary focus of ESL instruction has to be on helping L2 learners to fully participate in their new society as they did in their L1 society.

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