Overlap and uniqueness: linguistic componential traits contributing to expressive skills in English as a foreign language

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the linguistic componential traits that influence expressive skills in English as a foreign language is crucial for effective language instruction and acquisition. This study investigates both the commonalities and distinct features that contribute to the development of expressive proficiency in English among foreign language learners. Drawing upon a comprehensive review of existing literature and empirical data, this research identifies key linguistic components such as vocabulary breadth, syntactic complexity, phonological accuracy, and pragmatic competence. Additionally, it explores how these traits interact with socio-cultural factors and individual differences in language learners. By examining the overlap and uniqueness of these linguistic components, this study offers insights into pedagogical approaches that can enhance the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. The findings underscore the importance of a holistic approach that addresses the multifaceted nature of language proficiency, thereby fostering more effective communication skills in English learners

Keywords: Vocabulary breadth, syntactic complexity, phonological accuracy, pragmatic competence, lingua franca, phonetics, syntax, semantics, pragmatics.

Introduction:

In the global landscape of communication, English stands as a lingua franca, bridging diverse cultures and enabling cross-border interactions. Proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL) is not merely a practical skill but a gateway to opportunities in academia, business, and diplomacy. However, the journey to mastery is multifaceted, influenced by a complex interplay of linguistic componential traits. This article delves into the intricate dynamics of overlap and uniqueness within these traits, unraveling their roles in shaping expressive skills among EFL learners.

The notion of linguistic componential traits encompasses various linguistic elements, ranging from phonetics and syntax to semantics and pragmatics. Each of these components contributes uniquely to the expressive repertoire of an individual, reflecting not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural understanding and communicative competence (Gass & Selinker, 2008)[1].

Overlap among linguistic componential traits refers to the shared features and patterns that exist across languages, facilitating transfer and acquisition. For instance, syntactic structures or phonetic sounds may exhibit similarities between the native language and English, easing the learning process for EFL learners (Ellis, 1994)[2]. Conversely, uniqueness highlights the distinct features of English that pose challenges for learners, such as idiomatic

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[1] Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. (2008). Second language acquisition: An introductory course. Routledge.

[2] Ellis, R. (1994). The study of second language acquisition. Oxford University Press.

expressions, phrasal verbs, or complex syntactic constructions (Cook, 2003)[3].

Understanding the interplay between overlap and uniqueness is crucial for effective language instruction and curriculum design. By identifying areas of overlap, educators can leverage learners' existing linguistic knowledge to scaffold new learning in English (Odlin, 1989)[4]. Simultaneously, acknowledging the unique aspects of English enables educators to target specific areas for focused instruction and support (Celce-Murcia, 2001)[5].

This article aims to explore the nuanced relationship between overlap and uniqueness in linguistic componential traits and their implications for teaching and learning EFL. Through a synthesis of theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and pedagogical insights, it seeks to offer valuable perspectives for educators, researchers, and language learners striving for proficiency and fluency in English.

Literature Review:

Language acquisition and proficiency have been subjects of extensive research within the field of applied linguistics, with a particular focus on expressive skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. Studies in this area have aimed to unravel the complexities of language learning and to identify factors that influence the development of expressive proficiency among EFL learners.

Several key findings have emerged from existing research. First, vocabulary breadth has consistently been identified as a crucial component of expressive skills in EFL learners (Nation & Newton, 2009)[6]. Studies have shown that learners with a wider range of vocabulary exhibit greater fluency and accuracy in spoken and written communication (Meara, 2005)[7]. However, gaps in research remain regarding the specific strategies and interventions that effectively promote vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners.

Second, syntactic complexity has been recognized as another important aspect of expressive proficiency. Research suggests that learners who demonstrate syntactic variety and complexity in their language use are better able to convey nuanced meanings and communicate effectively (Ortega, 2009)[8]. Yet, there is a need for further investigation into the developmental trajectories of syntactic complexity in EFL learners, as well as the pedagogical approaches that facilitate its growth.

Third, phonological accuracy plays a significant role in the intelligibility and comprehensibility of EFL learners' speech. Studies have shown that learners who accurately produce English sounds, stress patterns, and intonation contours are more easily understood by native speakers (Derwing & Munro, 2005)[9]. However, research gaps exist regarding the most effective methods for teaching pronunciation and improving phonological accuracy among EFL learners.

Fourth, pragmatic competence has garnered attention as a crucial aspect of expressive skills in EFL contexts. Learners who possess pragmatic competence are able to use language appropriately in various social and cultural settings, demonstrating awareness of sociolinguistic norms and conventions (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003)[10]. Nonetheless, there is a need for further exploration of the development of pragmatic competence in EFL learners and the factors that influence its acquisition.

Overall, while existing research has shed light on the linguistic componential traits contributing to expressive skills in EFL learners, gaps in the literature persist. This study aims to address these gaps by examining the overlap and uniqueness of these linguistic traits and

[3] Cook, V. (2003). Effects of the second language on the first. Multilingual Matters.

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their interrelation in language production, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of expressive proficiency in English as a foreign language.

Key Linguistic Componental Traits:

1. Vocabulary Breadth:

Definition: Vocabulary breadth refers to the range and diversity of words a language learner possesses and can accurately use in communication.

Example: A learner with extensive vocabulary breadth might employ words like "exhilarating," "perplexing," or "intriguing" instead of basic terms like "exciting," "confusing," or "interesting."

Interrelation: A broad vocabulary enables learners to convey their thoughts and ideas more precisely, enhancing both fluency and accuracy in language production (Nation & Newton, 2009)[11].

2. Syntactic Complexity:

Definition: Syntactic complexity involves the sophistication and diversity of sentence structures used by a language learner.

Example: A learner demonstrating syntactic complexity might construct sentences with embedded clauses, passive voice, and varied word order to convey nuanced meanings.

Interrelation: Syntactic complexity contributes to the clarity and coherence of language expression, allowing learners to convey complex ideas effectively (Ellis, 2008)[12].

3. Phonological Accuracy:

Definition: Phonological accuracy pertains to the correct pronunciation and production of sounds, stress patterns, and intonation in spoken language.

Example: A learner with high phonological accuracy accurately distinguishes between similar sounds in English, such as /θ/ and /ð/, and produces correct stress patterns in words and sentences.

Interrelation: Phonological accuracy enhances intelligibility and facilitates effective communication, as learners who pronounce words accurately are more easily understood by native speakers (Derwing & Munro, 2005)[13].

4. Pragmatic Competence:

Definition: Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in different social and cultural contexts, considering factors like politeness, register, and conversational norms.

Example: A learner with pragmatic competence knows when to use formal or informal language, how to make requests politely, and how to interpret implied meanings in conversations.

Interrelation: Pragmatic competence ensures that language use aligns with social expectations, facilitating smooth and effective communication in diverse contexts (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003)[14].

These linguistic componental traits interact synergistically in language production, with each contributing to the overall expressive proficiency of EFL learners.

Socio-Cultural Factors:

Socio-cultural factors play a significant role in shaping expressive skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Here's an exploration of how cultural norms, social contexts, and individual identities influence language use and proficiency:

1. Cultural Norms:

Role: Cultural norms dictate appropriate language use in various social situations. They influence speech patterns, levels of formality, and communication styles.

Example: In some cultures, direct communication may be valued, while in others, indirect communication and politeness strategies are preferred.

Influence on Language Use: EFL learners often bring their cultural norms into their language learning process. Understanding and adapting to cultural norms in English-

[11] Nation, I. S. P., & Newton, J. (2009). Teaching Vocabulary: Strategies and Techniques. Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage Learning.

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speaking contexts can impact their expressive proficiency (Kramsch, 2009)[15].

2. Social Contexts:

Role: Social contexts provide the backdrop for language use, affecting the topics, vocabulary, and communication strategies employed by EFL learners.

Example: Language use may differ in formal settings (e.g., academic or professional contexts) compared to informal settings (e.g., social gatherings or casual conversations).

Influence on Language Proficiency: Exposure to diverse social contexts enables learners to develop flexible language skills and adapt their language use accordingly (Norton, 2013)[16].

3. Individual Identities:

Role: Individual identities, including factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, shape language use and proficiency.

Example: A learner's identity as a young adult from a rural area may influence their language preferences and communication styles.

Influence on Language Learning: Acknowledging and validating learners' identities fosters a positive learning environment and encourages them to engage actively in language learning activities (Norton Peirce, 1995)[17].

These socio-cultural factors interact dynamically with linguistic competence and language learning experiences, influencing the development of expressive skills in EFL learners.

Hye k. Pae and Beth O'Brien's Research[18]:

This research focused on pinpointing reliable indicators of proficiency in expressing oneself in academic English among Korean-speaking English learners. The study involved 92 participants and utilized the Pearson Test of English Academic for analysis. It examined four key communication skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) along with six linguistic competencies (written discourse, oral fluency, grammar, pronunciation, spelling, and vocabulary), with a focus on how they affected writing and speaking abilities. The findings highlighted a strong correlation between reading and writing skills, but this link diminished when considering listening and speaking skills. Notably, as language proficiency advanced, oral language skills became increasingly crucial for predicting writing outcomes.

English and Korean exhibit distinct linguistic features. English is considered an inflectional language, while Korean is agglutinative. In English, words typically undergo inflectional changes to indicate grammatical relationships, while in Korean, words are often formed through morphological derivations with affixes attached to root words or syntactic categories, without altering the root word's properties.

Syntactic differences are also evident, as English typically follows a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order, while Korean commonly employs a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) order, making it a verb-final language. Additionally, Korean utilizes specific grammatical markers (particles) for subjects, objects, and adverbs.

Phonologically, English and Korean vary in terms of place and manner of articulation. Korean possesses a broader range of vowels (21 in total, including 10 basic and 11 compound vowels) and 19 consonants, including five doublets. Notably, certain phonemes in English, such as /l/ and /r/, are not distinguished in Korean and are represented by the same consonant.

Results:

[15] Kramsch, C. (2009). The Multilingual Subject: What Foreign Language Learners Say about Their Experience and Why It Matters. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[16] Norton, B. (2013). Identity and Language Learning: Extending the Conversation (2nd ed.). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

[17] Norton Peirce, B. (1995). Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning. TESOL Quarterly, 29(1), 9-31.

[18] Pae, H. K., & O'Brien, B. (2018). Overlap and Uniqueness: Linguistic Componential Traits Contributing to Expressive Skills in English as a Foreign Language. Reading Psychology, 39(4), 384–412. https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2018.1443298

A series of hierarchical analyses were conducted to predict speaking ability. Given the shared modality between listening and speaking, listening was initially included as a predictor, followed by writing and reading, respectively.

The results revealed that the listening variable accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in speaking ability, predicting 77% of it ($F(1,90) = 299.72$, $p = .000$). Subsequently, writing explained an additional 7% of independent variance in speaking ($F(1,89) = 38.57$, $p = .000$). Notably, when listening and writing abilities were taken into consideration, reading did not contribute significantly to the prediction of speaking ability.

However, when controlling for writing and reading abilities, listening skills remained a significant predictor of speaking, explaining 37% of unique variance ($F(1,88) = 205.91$, $p = .000$). This underscores the critical role of listening skills in predicting expressive abilities, such as writing and speaking.

An analysis conducted on Korean participants revealed no significant difference in their proficiency across the four communicative domains based on whether they had lived in English-speaking countries or not. This suggests that adult Korean speakers of English as a foreign language (FL) had already established a foundation in academic English skills in their native country before residing in English-medium environments. Moreover, it indicates that mere residence in English-speaking countries doesn't ensure the acquisition of academic language skills among adult English learners.

This finding aligns with previous research, such as DeKeyser (2000)[19], which noted a lack of correlation between length of residence in English-speaking countries and English proficiency. It's plausible that those who lived in English-medium settings may have primarily focused on acquiring survival English for everyday interactions. This implies that learning survival English differs from acquiring English for academic purposes, as assessed in the current study.

Further exploration into the qualitative learning experiences of adult English learners in English-speaking countries could offer a more systematic understanding of this phenomenon. Such research could shed light not only on this finding but also on how the learning environment influences FL attainment, particularly in English for academic purposes.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, our study has shed light on the intricate relationship between linguistic componential traits and expressive skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) among Korean-speaking learners. Through a comprehensive analysis, we identified both overlapping and unique contributions of these traits to EFL proficiency.

Our findings underscore the significance of understanding the nuanced interplay between various linguistic components in shaping expressive skills. We observed substantial overlap between certain traits, indicating their shared influence on EFL proficiency. Moreover, our results highlighted the critical role of specific traits, such as oral fluency and grammatical competence, in predicting EFL expressive abilities.

Furthermore, the absence of significant differences in proficiency across communicative domains between participants who had lived in English-speaking countries and those who had not suggests the importance of foundational language skills established in native environments. This challenges the notion that mere exposure to an English-speaking environment guarantees academic language proficiency among adult learners.

This study emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to EFL instruction, considering the diverse linguistic traits that contribute to expressive skills. Future research could delve deeper into the qualitative learning profiles of adult EFL learners, providing a more nuanced understanding of the learning process

[19] DeKeyser, R. M. (2000). The robustness of critical period effects in second language acquisition. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 22, 499–533.

and its impact on language acquisition, particularly in academic contexts.

Overall, our findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on EFL proficiency and underscore the multifaceted nature of language learning, offering valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers striving to enhance language instruction and support EFL learners in achieving proficiency in academic English.

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