

# Understanding Language Teaching

*From Method to Postmethod*

B. Kumaravadivelu

*ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series*

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE  
TEACHING

*From Method to Postmethod*

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# UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE TEACHING

*From Method to Postmethod*

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*Dedicated to  
Language teachers everywhere  
Who constantly wrestle with the unknown.*

கற்றது கைமண்ணளவு  
கல்லாதது உலகளவு

- ஓளவையார்

*What we've learned is a handful of sand;  
What we haven't is the wide world.  
—Auvaiyaar (Circa 100 BC-250 AD)*

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# Brief Contents

|  |      |
|--|------|
| Preface: The Pattern Which Connects              | xiii |
| <b>PART ONE LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND TEACHING</b> |      |
| 1 Language: Concepts and Precepts                | 3    |
| 2 Learning: Factors and Processes                | 25   |
| 3 Teaching: Input and Interaction                | 55   |
| <b>PART TWO LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS</b>        |      |
| 4 Constituents and Categories of Methods         | 83   |
| 5 Language-Centered Methods                      | 97   |
| 6 Learner-Centered Methods                       | 114  |
| 7 Learning-Centered Methods                      | 134  |
| <b>PART THREE POSTMETHOD PERSPECTIVES</b>        |      |
| 8 Postmethod Condition                           | 161  |
| 9 Postmethod Pedagogy                            | 185  |
| 10 Postmethod Predicament                        | 215  |
| Postscript: The Pattern Which Comforts           | 224  |
| References                                       | 227  |
| Author Index                                     | 245  |
| Subject Index                                    | 251  |
|  | vii  |



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# Contents

Preface: The Pattern Which Connects xiii

## **PART ONE LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND TEACHING**

|          |                                   |           |
|----------|-----------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | Language: Concepts and Precepts   | <b>3</b>  |
|          | 1. Introduction                   | <i>3</i>  |
|          | 1.1. Theoretical Concepts         | <i>3</i>  |
|          | 1.1.1. Language as System         | <i>4</i>  |
|          | 1.1.2. Language as Discourse      | <i>7</i>  |
|          | 1.1.3. Language as Ideology       | <i>11</i> |
|          | 1.2. Pedagogic Precepts           | <i>16</i> |
|          | 1.2.1. Components of Competence   | <i>16</i> |
|          | 1.2.2. Areas of Knowledge/Ability | <i>21</i> |
|          | 1.3. Conclusion                   | <i>24</i> |
| <br>     |                                   |           |
| <b>2</b> | Learning: Factors and Processes   | <b>25</b> |
|          | 2. Introduction                   | <i>25</i> |
|          | 2.1. Input                        | <i>26</i> |
|          | 2.2. Intake                       | <i>27</i> |
|          | 2.3. Intake Factors               | <i>29</i> |
|          | 2.3.1. Individual Factors         | <i>31</i> |
|          | 2.3.2. Negotiation Factors        | <i>34</i> |
|          | 2.3.3. Tactical Factors           | <i>36</i> |
|          | 2.3.4. Affective Factors          | <i>38</i> |
|          | 2.3.5. Knowledge Factors          | <i>41</i> |

|  |    |           |
|--|----|-----------|
| 2.3.6. Environmental Factors                       | 42 |           |
| 2.4. Intake Processes                              | 45 |           |
| 2.4.1. Inferencing                                 | 45 |           |
| 2.4.2. Structuring                                 | 46 |           |
| 2.4.3. Restructuring                               | 47 |           |
| 2.5. Output  | 48 |           |
| 2.6. An Interactive Framework of Intake Processes  | 49 |           |
| 2.7. Conclusion                                    | 53 |           |
| <b>3 Teaching: Input and Interaction</b>           |    | <b>55</b> |
| 3. Introduction                                    | 55 |           |
| 3.1. Input Modifications                           | 57 |           |
| 3.1.1. Form-Based Input Modifications              | 58 |           |
| 3.1.2. Meaning-Based Input Modifications           | 60 |           |
| 3.1.3. Form- and Meaning-Based Input Modifications | 62 |           |
| 3.2. Interactional Activities                      | 65 |           |
| 3.2.1. Interaction as a Textual Activity           | 66 |           |
| 3.2.2. Interaction as an Interpersonal Activity    | 70 |           |
| 3.2.3. Interaction as an Ideational Activity       | 71 |           |
| 3.3. Content Specifications                        | 75 |           |
| 3.3.1. Syllabus Characteristics                    | 75 |           |
| 3.3.2. Syllabus Classifications                    | 79 |           |
| 3.4. Conclusion                                    | 80 |           |
| <br><b>PART TWO LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS</b>      |    |           |
| <b>4 Constituents and Categories of Methods</b>    |    | <b>83</b> |
| 4. Introduction                                    | 83 |           |
| 4.1. Constituents of Language Teaching Methods     | 83 |           |
| 4.1.1. Method and Methodology                      | 83 |           |
| 4.1.2. Approach, Method, and Technique             | 84 |           |
| 4.1.3. Approach, Design, and Procedure             | 86 |           |
| 4.1.4. Principles and Procedures                   | 87 |           |
| 4.2. Categories of Language Teaching Methods       | 90 |           |
| 4.2.1. Language-Centered Methods                   | 90 |           |
| 4.2.2. Learner-Centered Methods                    | 91 |           |
| 4.2.3. Learning-Centered Methods                   | 91 |           |
| 4.3. Designer Nonmethods                           | 92 |           |
| 4.4. A Special Task                                | 94 |           |
| 4.5. Conclusion                                    | 96 |           |
| <br><b>5 Language-Centered Methods</b>             |    | <b>97</b> |
| 5. Introduction                                    | 97 |           |
| 5.1. Theoretical Principles                        | 99 |           |
| 5.1.1. Theory of Language                          | 99 |           |

- 5.1.2. Theory of Language Learning 99
- 5.1.3. Theory of Language Teaching 101
- 5.1.4. Content Specifications 102
- 5.2. Classroom Procedures 103
  - 5.2.1. Input Modifications 103
  - 5.2.2. Interactional Activities 106
- 5.3. A Critical Assessment 109
- 5.4. Conclusion 113

## 6 Learner-Centered Methods 114

- 6. Introduction 114
- 6.1. Theoretical Principles 116
  - 6.1.1. Theory of Language 116
  - 6.1.2. Theory of Language Learning 118
  - 6.1.3. Theory of Language Teaching 119
  - 6.1.4. Content Specifications 121
- 6.2. Classroom Procedures 123
  - 6.2.1. Input Modifications 124
  - 6.2.2. Interactional Activities 125
- 6.3. A Critical Assessment 129
- 6.4. Conclusion 132

## 7 Learning-Centered Methods 134

- 7. Introduction 134
- 7.1. Theoretical Principles 136
  - 7.1.1. Theory of Language 136
  - 7.1.2. Theory of Language Learning 136
  - 7.1.3. Theory of Language Teaching 142
  - 7.1.4. Content Specifications 144
- 7.2. Classroom Procedures 146
  - 7.2.1. Input Modifications 146
  - 7.2.2. Interactional Activities 149
- 7.3. A Critical Assessment 156
- 7.4. Conclusion 157

## PART THREE POSTMETHOD PERSPECTIVES

## 8 Postmethod Condition 161

- 8. Introduction 161
- 8.1. The Limits of Method 162
  - 8.1.1. The Meaning of Method 162
  - 8.1.2. The Myth of Method 163
  - 8.1.3. The Death of Method 168
- 8.2. The Logic of Postmethod 170
  - 8.2.1. Pedagogic Parameters 171

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| 8.2.2. Pedagogic Indicators                    | 176        |
| 8.3. Conclusion                                | 183        |
| <b>9 Postmethod Pedagogy</b>                   | <b>185</b> |
| 9. Introduction                                | 185        |
| 9.1. The Three-Dimensional Framework           | 186        |
| 9.1.1. The Intralingual–Crosslingual Dimension | 187        |
| 9.1.2. The Analytic-Experiential Dimension     | 189        |
| 9.1.3. The Explicit–Implicit Dimension         | 191        |
| 9.2. The Exploratory Practice Framework        | 193        |
| 9.2.1. The Principle of Exploratory Practice   | 195        |
| 9.2.2. The Practice of Exploratory Practice    | 196        |
| 9.2.3. The Global and the Local                | 198        |
| 9.3. The Macrostrategic Framework              | 199        |
| 9.3.1. Macrostrategies                         | 201        |
| 9.3.2. Microstrategies                         | 208        |
| 9.4. Conclusion                                | 213        |
| <b>10 Postmethod Predicament</b>               | <b>215</b> |
| 10. Introduction                               | 215        |
| 10.1. Challenging Barriers                     | 216        |
| 10.1.1. The Pedagogical Barrier                | 216        |
| 10.1.2. The Ideological Barrier                | 218        |
| 10.2. Facilitating Factors                     | 221        |
| 10.3. Conclusion                               | 223        |
| Postscript: The Pattern Which Comforts         | 224        |
| References                                     | 227        |
| Author Index                                   | 245        |
| Subject Index                                  | 251        |

LANGUAGE, LEARNING,  
AND TEACHING

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# Language: Concepts and Precepts

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“A definition of language,” observed the British cultural critic, Raymond Williams, “is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world” (1977, p. 21). That is because language permeates every aspect of human experience, and creates as well as reflects images of that experience. It is almost impossible to imagine human life without it. And yet, we seldom think about it. We are oblivious of its ubiquitous presence in and around us, just as the fish is (or, is it?) unmindful of the water it is submerged in. Even those who systematically study language have not fully figured out what it is. A case in point: After brilliantly synthesizing both Western and non-Western visions of language developed through the ages, the leading French linguist and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva (1989, p. 329) ends her erudite book on language with the humbling phrase: “that still unknown object—language.”

Without delving deep into that still unknown object, I briefly outline in this chapter my understanding of how theoretical linguists have attempted to decipher the fundamental concepts of language and how applied linguists have tried to turn some of those theoretical concepts into applicable pedagogic precepts.

### 1.1. THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

Although there are timeless and endless debates on what constitutes language, for the limited purpose of understanding its relevance for language



learning and teaching, I look at it from three broad conceptual vantage points: language as system, language as discourse, and language as ideology.

### 1.1.1. Language as System

We all know that a human language is a well-organized and well-crafted instrument. That is to say, all the basic components of a language work in tandem in a coherent and systematic manner. They are certainly not a random collection of disparate units. From one perspective, a study of language is basically a study of its systems and subsystems. By treating language as system, we are merely acknowledging that each unit of language, from a single sound to a complex word to a large text—spoken or written—has a character of its own, and each is, in some principled way, delimited by and dependent upon its co-occurring units.

As we learn from any introductory textbook in linguistics, the central core of language as system consists of the phonological system that deals with the patterns of sound, the semantic system that deals with the meaning of words, and the syntactic system that deals with the rules of grammar. For instance, at the phonological level, with regard to the pattern of English, stop consonants are distinguished from one another according their place of articulation (bilabial, alveolar, velar) and their manner of articulation (voiceless, voiced) as shown:

|           | Bilabial | Alveolar | Velar |
|-----------|----------|----------|-------|
| Voiceless | /p/      | /t/      | /k/   |
| Voiced    | /b/      | /d/      | /g/   |

These minimal sounds, or phonemes as they are called, have contrastive value in the sense that replacing one with another will make a different word as in pit–bit, or ten–den, and so forth.

Understanding the sound system of a language entails an understanding of which sounds can appear word-initially or word-finally, or which can follow which. It also entails an understanding of how certain sound sequences signify certain meanings. In the aforementioned example, the user of English knows that *ten* and *den* are two different words with two different meanings. We learn from semantics that every *morpheme*, which is a collection of phonemes arranged in a particular way, expresses a distinct meaning, and that there are free morphemes that can occur independently (as in *den*, *dance*) or bound morphemes like plural *-s*, or past tense *-ed*, which are attached to a free morpheme (as in *dens*, *danced*).

Different words are put together to form a sentence, again within the confines of a rule-governed grammatical system. The sentence, *The baby is sleeping peacefully*, is grammatical only because of the way the words have

been strung together. A change in the sequence such as *Sleeping is the peacefully baby* will make the sentence ungrammatical. Conversely, sentences that may have a grammatically well-formed sequence as in the well known example, *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*, may not make any sense at all. These examples show, in part, that “the nouns and verbs and adjectives are not just hitched end to end in one long chain, there is some overarching blueprint or plan for the sentence that puts each word in a specific slot” (Pinker, 1994, p. 94).

Language as system enables the language user to combine phonemes to form words, words to form phrases, phrases to form sentences, and sentences to form spoken or written texts—each unit following its own rules as well as the rules for combination. Crucial to understanding language, then, is the idea of *systematicity*. Language as system, however, is much more complex than the description so far may lead us to believe. A true understanding of the complexity of language requires a robust method of analysis. More than anybody else in the modern era, it is Chomsky who has persuasively demonstrated that language as system is amenable to scientific analysis and, in doing so, he has elevated our ability to deal with language as system to a higher level of sophistication.

Chomsky (1959, 1965, and elsewhere) began by pointing out certain fundamental facts about language as system. First and foremost, all adult native speakers of a language are able to produce and understand myriad sentences that they have never said or heard before. In other words, an infinite number of sentences can be produced using a finite number of grammatical rules. Second, with regard to the child’s first language acquisition, there is what Chomsky calls “the poverty of stimulus,” that is, the language input exposed to the child is both quantitatively and qualitatively poor but still the child is able to produce, in a short period of time, language output that is immensely rich. The stimulus (that is the language data) available to the child is impoverished in the sense that it has only a limited set of sentences among all possible sentences in a language, and a large number of grammatical types remain unrepresented in the data as well. Besides, the parents’ or the caretakers’ language addressed to the child may not be the best possible sample because it is full of hesitations, false starts, sentence fragments, and even grammatical deviations. But still, all children, except those who may have neurological or biological defects, acquire the complex language rapidly, and, more importantly, without any formal instruction.

The Chomskyan thought about these and other “logical problems of language acquisition” is essentially premised upon mentalism, which states that much of human behavior is biologically determined. And, language behavior is no exception. Positing the notion of “innateness,” Chomsky argues that human beings, by virtue of their characteristic genetic structure,

are born with an “innate ability,” that is, with an “initial state” of “language faculty” in which general properties of language as system are prewired. Using this “prewired” system, children are able to distill and develop the complex grammatical system out of the speech of their parents and caretakers. The system that the child is born with is common to the grammars of all human languages, and hence Chomsky calls it “Universal Grammar.”

The *Universal Grammar* is a set of abstract concepts governing the grammatical structure of all languages that are genetically encoded in the human brain. It comprises principles and parameters. The way it is considered to work is that children, using the unconscious knowledge of Universal Grammar, would know the underlying universal principles of language; for instance, languages usually have nouns, pronouns, and verbs. They would also know their parameters; for instance, in some languages verbs can be placed at the end of the sentence, or in some languages pronouns can be dropped when in the subject position, and so forth. Thus, based on the specific language they are exposed to, children determine, of course unconsciously, whether their native language (L1) allows the deletion of pronouns (as in the case of Spanish), or not (as in the case of English). Such unconscious knowledge helps children eventually to “generate” or create all and only grammatical sentences in their L1.

The abstract generative system of grammar that Chomsky has proposed (which he has frequently updated) is actually a theory of linguistic competence. He makes “a fundamental distinction between *competence* (the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language) and *performance* (the actual use of language in concrete situations)” (1965, p. 4) and he is concerned only with discovering the mental reality (i.e., competence) underlying the actual behavior (i.e., performance) of a speaker–hearer. He is very clear in emphasizing that his linguistic theory

is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker–listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of language in actual performance. (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3)

Clearly, the speaker-hearer Chomsky is talking about is an artificially constructed idealized person; not an actual language user. In addition, as Lyons (1996, p. 30) pointed out, for Chomsky, “linguistic competence is the speaker–hearer’s tacit, rather than conscious or even cognitively accessible, knowledge of the language-system.”

Chomsky’s theory of linguistic competence is actually a theory of grammatical competence. It should, however, be remembered that his term, *lin-*

*guistic competence*, subsumes phonological, syntactic, and semantic subsystems. That is why the unconscious possession of this abstract linguistic competence helps native speakers of a language to discriminate well-formed sentences from ill-formed word-sequences as well as well-formed sentences that make sense from those that do not (see the previously given examples). In the same way, native speakers of English can also identify the ambiguity in sentences like

*Visiting mother-in-law can be boring.*

or tell who the agent is in structurally identical pairs like

*John is easy to please.*

*John is eager to please.*

In other words, linguistic competence entails a semantic component that indicates the intrinsic meaning of sentences. This intrinsic meaning is semantic meaning and should not be confused with pragmatic meaning, which takes into consideration actual language use, that is, the speaker–hearer’s ability to use utterances that are deemed appropriate in a particular communicative situation. As Chomsky clarifies, the notion of competence does not include actual language use: “The term ‘competence’ entered the technical literature in an effort to avoid the slew of problems relating to ‘knowledge,’ but it is misleading in that it suggests ‘ability’—an association I would like to sever” (Chomsky, 1980, p. 59).

By not considering the pragmatic aspect of language use in formulating his theory of linguistic competence, Chomsky is in no way dismissing its importance. For purposes of “enquiry and exposition,” he considers it fit “to distinguish ‘grammatical competence’ from ‘pragmatic competence,’ restricting the first to the knowledge of form and meaning and the second to knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use . . .” (Chomsky, 1980, p. 224). In other words, he is interested in looking at human language as a cognitive psychological mechanism and not as a communicative tool for social interaction. Those who do treat language as a vehicle for communication find it absolutely necessary to go beyond language as system and seriously consider the nature of language as discourse.

### 1.1.2. Language as Discourse

In the field of linguistics, the term *discourse* is used to refer generally to “an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g., words, structures, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a

given audience/interlocutor” (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p. 4). The focus here is a connected and contextualized unit of language use. During the 1970s, discourse analysis began to gain grounds partly as a response to the dominance of the Chomskyan view of language as system that focused mainly on disconnected and decontextualized units of phonology, syntax, and semantics. Although there are many who have made contributions to our understanding of language as discourse, I briefly consider here the seminal works of Halliday, Hymes, and Austin.

Rejecting the Chomskyan emphasis on grammar, Halliday (1973) defined language as *meaning potential*, that is, as sets of options in meaning that are available to the speaker–hearer in social contexts. Instead of viewing language as something exclusively internal to the learner, as Chomsky does, Halliday views it as a means of functioning in society. From a functional perspective, he sees three metafunctions or macrofunctions of language: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual. The *ideational function* represents the individual’s meaning potential and relates to the expression and experience of the concepts, processes, and objects governing the physical and natural phenomena of the world around. The *interpersonal function* deals with the individual’s personal relationships with people. The *textual function* refers to the linguistic realizations of the ideational and interpersonal functions enabling the individual to construct coherent texts, spoken or written.

For Halliday, language communication is the product or the result of the process of interplay between the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions of language. Through this interplay, the meaning potential of language is realized. Learning a language, then, entails “learning to mean.” As the child interacts with language and language users, he or she begins to understand the meaning potential within the language, and develops a capacity to use it. It is only through meaningful interactive activities in communicative contexts that a learner broadens and deepens the capacity for language use. And, language use is always embedded in a sociocultural milieu. That is why Halliday (1973) preferred to define meaning potential “not in terms of the mind but in terms of the culture” (p. 52).

Unlike Halliday who questions the Chomskyan notion of competence and seeks to replace it, Hymes seeks to expand it. For Chomsky, competence is a mental structure of tacit knowledge possessed by the idealized speaker–hearer, but for Hymes, it is that plus the communicative ability to use a language in concrete situations.

We have to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, and in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to

accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others. (Hymes, 1972, pp. 277–278)

And the way Hymes seeks to account for that fact is by positing the concept of *communicative competence*, which “is dependent upon both (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use” (1972, p. 282).

Communicative competence consists of grammatical competence as well as sociolinguistic competence, that is, factors governing successful communication. Hymes (1972) identified these factors, and has used an acronym SPEAKING to describe them:

*Setting* refers to the place and time in which the communicative event takes place.

*Participants* refers to speakers and hearers and their role relationships.

*Ends* refers to the stated or unstated objectives the participants wish to accomplish.

*Act* sequence refers to the form, content, and sequence of utterances.

*Key* refers to the manner and tone (serious, sarcastic, etc.) of the utterances.

*Instrumentalities* refers to the channel (oral or written) and the code (formal or informal).

*Norms* refers to conventions of interaction and interpretation based on shared knowledge.

*Genre* refers to categories of communication such as lecture, report, essay, poem, and so forth.

These flexible, overlapping factors, which vary from culture to culture, provide the bases for determining the rules of language use in a given context. For Hymes, knowing a language is knowing not only the rules of grammatical usage but also the rules of communicative use. He makes that amply clear in his oft-quoted statement: “There are rules of use without which the rules of usage are useless.”

Because both Chomsky and Hymes accept and use the notion of competence, it is instructive to compare it in its broadest terms. Chomsky’s notion is limited to the tacit knowledge of formal linguistic properties possessed by the idealized speaker–hearer. Hymes’ notion goes well beyond that to include actual knowledge and ability possessed by the language user. Furthermore, Chomsky’s notion is biologically based, whereas Hymes’ is more socially based. “The former is purely individual, the latter is mainly social. The former concerns form; the latter concerns function. The former characterizes a state; the latter involves processes” (Taylor, 1988, p. 156). It is rather apparent, then, that Hymes brings a much wider perspective to the notion of competence, one that has more relevance for treating and understanding language as a vehicle for communication.

Yet another aspect of language communication that is relevant for our discussion here is the notion of speech acts. In his classic book, *How to Do Things With Words*, published in 1962, Austin, a language philosopher, raised the question *What do we do with language?* and answered, simply: We perform speech acts. By *speech acts*, he refers to the everyday activity of informing, instructing, ordering, threatening, complaining, describing, and scores of other such activities for which we use our language. In other words, language is an activity that we *do* in myriad situations and circumstances. Of all the numerous phenomena of language, Austin asserts: “The total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating” (1962, p. 148, emphasis in original).

To elucidate Austin’s speech act theory in simple terms: Every speech act that we perform has three components, which he calls *locution*, *illocution*, and *perlocution*. The first refers to a propositional statement, the second to its intended meaning, and the third to its expected response. The act of saying something, in and of itself, is a locutionary act. It is no more than a string of words containing phonological (sounds), syntactic (grammar), and semantic (word meaning) elements put together in a systemically acceptable sequence. In performing a locutionary act, one often performs such an act as “asking or answering a question, giving some information or an assurance or a warning, announcing a verdict or an intention, pronouncing sentence, making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism, making an identification or giving a description, and the numerous like” (Austin, 1962, pp. 98–99). The perlocutionary act is the effect or the consequence of an utterance in a given situation.

To illustrate a speech act, take a simple and short utterance, *Move it*. Here the locutionary act is the act of saying *move it* meaning by *move* move, and referring by *it* to the object in question. If we assume an appropriate context, the illocutionary act in this case is an act of ordering (or, urging or advising, or suggesting, etc., in different contexts) somebody to move it. The perlocutionary act, again assuming an appropriate context here, is the act of actually moving it.

The most important component of a speech act is the illocutionary act. For it to have what Austin calls *illocutionary force*, a speech act has to meet certain socially agreed upon demands or conventions. For instance, a statement like *I now pronounce you man and wife* has its intended illocutionary force only if it is uttered in a proper context (e.g., a church) and by a proper person (e.g., a priest). The same statement uttered by a clerk in a department store will not render two customers a married couple! The statement gains its illocutionary force only because of the situational context in which it is uttered and not because of its linguistic properties. Or, to quote Joseph, Love, and Taylor (2001):

the illocutionary force of an utterance is not part of meaning the words have simply in virtue of being those words. On the other hand, the illocutionary act is performed *by* or *in* rather than merely *through* using those words. The illocutionary force of an utterance is simultaneously both context-dependent and, in context, inherent in the uttering of the words themselves. (p. 103, italics in original)

The key word in the above quote is *context*. It is also key to language as discourse in general. In linguistics, discourse was initially defined as a unit of coherent language consisting of more than one sentence, to which was added a reference to language use in context. Combining these two perspectives, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) gave the definition quoted at the beginning of this section and repeated here for convenience: Discourse “is an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g., words, structures, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor” (p. 4). Some discourse analysts (e.g., McCarthy & Carter, 1994) go beyond internal relationships of form and meaning to include “the interpersonal, variational and negotiable aspects of language” (p. xii), and some others (e.g., G. Cook, 1994) include “a form of knowledge of the world” (p. 24) as well.

The added focus on context has certainly facilitated a useful connection between language structure and the immediate social context in which it is used. It has also aided, from a classroom discourse point of view, the study of the routines of turn-taking, turn sequencing, activity types, and elicitation techniques in the language classroom. However, a truly discourse-based view of language should have also considered “the higher order operations of language at the interface of cultural and ideological meanings and returning to the lower-order forms of language which are often crucial to the patterning of such meanings” (McCarthy & Carter, 1994, p. 38). And yet, most “mainstream” discourse analysts have found contentment in analyzing “the lower order forms of language” and leaving “the higher order operations of language” largely untouched. That challenging task has been recently taken up by *critical* discourse analysts who explore language as ideology.

### 1.1.3. Language as Ideology

*Ideology* is “a systematic body of ideas, organized from a particular point of view” (Kress & Hodge, 1979, p. 6). Stated as such, it sounds rather simple and straightforward. As a matter of fact, ideology is a contested concept. Its reference and relevance cut across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, political science, history, and cultural studies. Linguistics is a much belated and bewildered entrant, in spite of the fact that language and ideol-



ogy are closely connected. Among the many interpretations of the concept of ideology, there is one common thread that unflinchingly runs through all of them: its ties to power and domination.

In an authoritative book on *Ideology and Modern Culture*, Thompson (1990) defined ideology rather briskly as “*meaning in the service of power*” (p. 7, emphasis in original). Therefore, “*to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination*” (p. 56, emphasis in original). The best way to investigate ideology, according to Thompson, is

to investigate the ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds, from everyday linguistic utterances to complex images and texts; it requires us to investigate the social contexts within which symbolic forms are employed and deployed; and it calls upon us to ask whether, and if so how, the meaning mobilized by symbolic forms serves, in specific contexts, to establish and sustain relations of domination. (1990, p. 7)

In a very succinct manner, Thompson has made the connection between language and ideology very clear.

Expanding that connection, anthropologist Kroskrity (2000, all italics in original) suggested that it is profitable to think of language ideologies as a cluster of concepts consisting of four converging dimensions:

- First, “*language ideologies represent the perception of language and discourse that is constructed in the interests of a specific social or cultural group*” (p. 8). That is, notions of language and discourse are grounded in social experience and often demonstrably tied to the promotion and protection of political-economic interests.
- Second, “*language ideologies are profitably conceived as multiple because of the multiplicity of meaningful social divisions (class, gender, clan, elites, generations, and so on) within sociocultural groups that have the potential to produce divergent perspectives expressed as indices of group membership*” (p. 12). That is, language ideologies are grounded in social experiences that are never uniformly distributed across diverse communities.
- Third, “*members may display varying degrees of awareness of local language ideologies*” (p. 18). That is, depending on the role they play, people develop different degrees of consciousness about ideologically grounded discourse.
- Finally, “*members’ language ideologies mediate between social structures and forms of talk*” (p. 21). That is, people’s sociocultural experience and interactive patterns contribute to their construction and understanding of language ideologies.

These four dimensions, according to Kroskrity, must be considered seriously if we are to understand the connection between language and ideology.

These four dimensions of language ideology are a clear echo of the broad-based concept of discourse that poststructural thinkers such as Foucault have enunciated. Foucault's concept of *discourse* is significantly different from that of mainstream linguists. For him discourse is not just the suprasentential aspect of language; rather, language itself is one aspect of discourse. In accordance with that view, he offers a three-dimensional definition of discourse "treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements" (Foucault, 1972, p. 80). The first definition relates to all actual utterances or texts. The second relates to specific formations or fields, as in "the discourse of racism" or "the discourse of feminism." The third relates to sociopolitical structures that create the conditions governing particular utterances or texts. Discourse thus designates the entire conceptual territory on which knowledge is produced and reproduced. It includes not only what is actually thought and articulated but also determines what can be said or heard and what silenced, what is acceptable and what is tabooed. Discourse in this sense is a whole field or domain within which language is used in particular ways. This field or domain is produced in and through social practices, institutions, and actions.

In characterizing language as one, and only one, of the multitude of organisms that constitute discourse, Foucault (1970, and elsewhere) significantly extended the notion of linguistic text. A *text* means what it means not because of any inherent objective linguistic features but because it is generated by discursive formations, each with its particular ideologies and particular ways of controlling power. No text is innocent and every text reflects a fragment of the world we live in. In other words, texts are political because all discursive formations are political. Analyzing text or discourse therefore means analyzing discursive formations, which are essentially political in character and ideological in content.

Such a concept of *language ideology* is usually reflected in the ideologically grounded perceptions and practices of language use that are shaped and reshaped by dominant institutional forces, historical processes, and vested interests. For instance, the preeminent cultural critic, Said (1978), in his book, *Orientalism*, presented compelling textual evidence from literary, historical, sociological, and anthropological texts produced by the colonial West to represent the colonized people. He uses the term *Orientalism* to refer to a systematically constructed discourse by which the powerful West "was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively . . ." (Said, 1978, p. 3). It forms an interrelated web of ideas, images, and texts from the

scholarly to the popular, produced by artists, writers, missionaries, travelers, politicians, militarists, and administrators, that shape and structure Western representations of colonized peoples and their cultures.

In yet another manifestation of the nexus between power and language, the French sociologist, Bourdieu (1991), in his book, *Language and Symbolic Power*, described symbolic power “as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself . . .” (p. 170). He also showed the innumerable and subtle strategies by which language can be used as an instrument of communication as well as control, coercion as well as constraint, and condescension as well as contempt. He pointed out how variations in accent, intonation, and vocabulary reflect differential power positions in the social hierarchy. According to him, “what creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the social order, is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them” (p. 170). In another work, Bourdieu (1977) invoked the notion of “legitimate discourse” and elaborated it by saying that “a language is worth what those who speak it are worth, so too, at the level of interactions between individuals, speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it” (p. 652).

On a personal note, I was recently reminded of the significance of Bourdieu’s statement when I read the remarks of a prominent applied linguist, Larsen-Freeman, about her inventing a new word, *grammaring*. In explaining how she, as a native speaker of English, is empowered to invent new words, she says:

The point is that as language teachers, we should never forget that issues of power and language are intimately connected. For example, it is unfair, but nevertheless true, that native speakers of a language are permitted to create neologisms, as I have done with *grammaring*. Such a coinage, however, might have been corrected if a nonnative speaker of English had been its author. (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 64)

I take this as a gentle reminder that I, as a nonnative speaker of English, do not have “permission” to coin a new word, and if I had coined one, it might have been corrected. It is unfair, but nevertheless true!

It is the unfair and true nature of language ideology that a group of linguists, who call themselves *critical discourse analysts*, attempt to unravel. By critically analyzing the systematic distortion of language use, they focus on the exploitation of “*meaning in the service of power.*” More specifically, as Fairclough (1995), in his introductory book, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, explained, critical discourse analysts aim

to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power. (p. 132)

In the context of language ideology, they see power in terms of “asymmetries between participants in discourse events, and in terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed and consumed (and hence the shapes of texts) in particular sociocultural contexts” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 1). Their working assumption is that any level of language structure and use is a relevant site for critical and ideological analysis. Their method of analysis includes *description* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the text and the discursive processes, and *explanation* of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social practices.

Recognizing the importance of critical discourse analysis, Pennycook (2001), in his book, *Critical Applied Linguistics*, has introduced a newly defined area of applied linguistic work that seeks to take a critical look at the politics of knowledge, the politics of language, the politics of text, and the politics of pedagogy within a coherent conceptual framework. He has called for a strengthening of critical discourse analysis by going beyond any prior sociological analysis of power and its connection to language, and by conducting linguistic analyses of texts to show how power may operate through language. His aim is to make the task of applied linguistics “to be one of exploration rather than of mere revelation” (p. 93).

From an educational point of view, critical discourse analysts see language teaching as a prime source for sensitizing learners to social inequalities that confront them, and for developing necessary capabilities for addressing those inequalities. Therefore, they advocate the creation of critical language awareness in our learners. Such a task should be fully integrated, not only with the development of language practices across the curriculum, but also with the development of the individual learner’s intellectual capabilities that are required for long-term, multifaceted struggles in various sociopolitical arenas. They, however, caution that instruction in critical language awareness “should not push learners into oppositional practices which condemn them to disadvantage and marginalization; it should equip them with the capacities and understanding which are preconditions for meaningful choice and effective citizenship in the domain of language” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 252).

Applying the principles of critical discourse analysis to explore the nature of input and interaction in the language classroom, I have questioned the present practice of conducting classroom discourse analysis that focuses narrowly on turn-taking, turn sequencing, activity types, and elicitation techniques. I have argued that

a true and meaningful understanding of sociocultural aspects of classroom discourse can be achieved not by realizing the surface level features of communicative performance or conversational style but only by recognizing the complex and competing world of discourses that exist in the classroom. (Kumaravadivelu, 1999a, p. 470)

Accordingly, I have suggested a conceptual framework for conducting critical classroom discourse analysis (CCDA) that will cross the borders of the classroom to investigate broader social, cultural, political, and historical structures that have a bearing on classroom input and interaction.

To sum up our discussion of the theoretical concepts of language, we learned that language as system deals with the phonological, syntactic, and semantic features of language, and with the notion of linguistic competence that is mostly confined to semantico-grammatical knowledge of the language. Language as discourse, on the other hand, focuses on the nature of language communication, with its emphasis on the rules of language use that are appropriate to a particular communicative context. Language as ideology, however, goes way beyond the confines of systemic and discursal features of language, and locates it as a site for power and domination by treating it both as a transporter and a translator of ideology that serves vested interests. These three theoretical concepts of language demonstrate the complexity of “that still unknown object—language.”

## 1.2. PEDAGOGIC PRECEPTS

The theoretical concepts already discussed have helped applied linguists to derive useful and usable conceptual guidelines about language for purposes of classroom teaching. I use the term *pedagogic precepts* to refer to these conceptual guidelines. They are aimed at addressing questions such as what is language, and what does it mean to know and use a language. They form the bases for effective language teaching. I discuss them in terms of components of language competence, and areas of language knowledge/ability.

### 1.2.1. Components of Competence

In an influential paper published in 1980, Canadian applied linguists Canale and Swain presented a comprehensive framework establishing “a clear statement of the content and boundaries of communicative competence—one that will lead to more useful and effective second language teaching and allow more valid and reliable measurement of second language communication skills” (1980, p. 1). Their framework initially consisted of three compo-

nents of competence, and was later revised to include a fourth one (Canale, 1983). The components they have identified are: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. The framework is derived from the prevailing perspectives on language as system and language as discourse previously discussed, as well as from the authors' own insights and interpretations.

For Canale and Swain, grammatical competence includes "knowledge of lexical items and the rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology" (p. 29). Recall from the earlier discussion that this cluster of items constitutes what Chomsky has also called *grammatical competence*, although this may include the ability to use grammar (Chomsky's performance) as well. However, Canale and Swain make it clear that they are not linking it to any single theory of grammar. This component addresses language as system.

Sociolinguistic competence that constituted a single component in the original version was later split into two: sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence. These two components deal with different aspects of language as discourse. By *sociolinguistic competence* is meant the knowledge of "the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purposes of the interaction, and norms or conventions of interaction" (Canale, 1983, p. 7). This component emphasizes, following Hymes, sociocultural appropriateness of an utterance.

Discourse competence takes care of some other aspects of language as discourse such as how a series of sentences or utterances are connected into a whole text, spoken or written. In the opinion of Celce-Murcia and Olshain (2000), discourse competence forms "the core" of the Canale and Swain framework because it "is where everything else comes together: It is in discourse and through discourse that all of the other competencies are realized. And it is in discourse and through discourse that the manifestation of the other competencies can best be observed, researched, and assessed" (p. 16).

The last of the components, *strategic competence*, is made up of "verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). As Savignon (1983) pointed out, this component consists of coping or survival strategies such as paraphrase, circumlocution, repetition, hesitation, avoidance, and guessing, as well as shifts in register and style.

The Canale/Swain framework is perhaps the first one to make use of the prevailing understanding of language as system and language as discourse in order to derive a comprehensive theoretical framework of language competence with pedagogic application in mind. It is specifically designed

for language teaching and testing. However, language teaching experts such as Skehan (1998) and Widdowson (2003) have questioned Canale and Swain's (1980) claim that the framework establishes a clear statement of the content and boundaries of communicative competence just as testing experts such as Bachman (1990) and Shohamy (1996) have doubted their claim that it allows more valid and reliable measurement of second language communication skills.

To consolidate the concerns expressed by critics: the major drawback of the framework is that the four competencies conceptually overlap and that the interdependencies among them are not at all apparent. For instance, as Widdowson (2003) pointed out, although grammatical competence incorporates lexical knowledge, it is not clear how sociolinguistic competence acts upon it in the speaker's choice of grammatical or lexical forms. Similarly, "discourse competence, isolated in the Canale scheme as a separate component of communicative competence, only exists as a function of the relationship between the grammatical and the sociolinguistic; without this relationship it has no communicative status whatever" (p. 167). According to Skehan (1998), the framework does not advance in any substantial way the prediction and generalization necessary for measurement of language learning because there is "no direct way of relating underlying abilities to performance and processing conditions, nor is there any systematic basis for examining the language demands, of a range of different contexts" (p. 158). As a result, he concludes that the framework cannot be considered either "working" or "comprehensive," although it is "full of insights" (p. 159).

The necessity for the distinctness of strategic competence has also been questioned. For instance, Taylor (1988) points out that strategic competence fails "to distinguish between knowledge and ability, or rather they incorporate both, and on the other hand they do not distinguish between those strategies which all speakers have, both native and non-native, and those which are peculiar to non-native speakers" (p. 158). In other words, by virtue of their mastery in their first language, L2 speakers may already possess some of the coping or compensation strategies necessary to get over communicative breakdowns; and, the Canale/Swain framework does not take that into consideration. Even if it is a competence that has to be learned anew, it does not, as Widdowson (2003) argues,

seem to be a separate component of competence, but rather a tactical process whereby the other components are related and brought into pragmatic plays required for a particular communicative occasion. As such it is hard to see how it can be specified. It seems reasonable enough to talk about a knowledge of grammatical rules or sociocultural conventions, but knowing how to compensate for relative incompetence will surely often, if not usually, be a matter of expedient tactical maneuver. (p. 166)

As a result of these and other shortcomings of the Canale/Swain framework, other formulations of language competence have been proposed. Bachman (1990), for instance, has proposed a Communicative Language Ability model. It divides overall language competence into two broad categories: organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence is further divided into grammatical competence and textual competence. Similarly, pragmatic competence is divided into illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. In yet another model, Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1995) divided communicative competence into linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, and actional competencies where *actional competence* refers to more formulaic aspects of language such as the oral speech acts or the written rhetorical moves that function as part of communicative competence.

It is apparent that the newer approaches to components of competence take the Canale/Swain model as a point of departure and provide an extension or a reformulation of the same, and as such they all share the same conceptual problems that the original model has been criticized for. As Widdowson (2003) rightly points out, “the essential problem with these different models of communicative competence is that they analyse a complex process into a static set of components, and as such cannot account for the dynamic interrelationships which are engaged in communication itself” (pp. 169–170).

There is yet another crucial construct of competence that has long been neglected by many. The concept of *competence* proposed by Chomsky and reinterpreted and reinforced by others deals with the language competence residing in the monolingual mind. This cannot but offer only a limited and limiting perspective on competence because

the description of linguistic competence has been misleadingly based on monolinguals, like a description of juggling based on a person who can throw one ball in the air and catch it, rather than on a description of a person who can handle two or more balls at the same time. Calling the knowledge of a person who knows one language linguistic competence may be as misleading as calling throwing one ball in the air juggling. (V. Cook, 1996, p. 67)

In order, therefore, to mend the misleading concept and to cover the overall system of competence of more than one language in the mind of a bilingual speaker or an L2 learner, the British applied linguist, Cook, introduced the term *multicompetence*. In a series of writings, Cook has vigorously defended the concept (see V. Cook, 1991, 1992, 1996, 2002). He defines multicompetence as “the compound state of a mind with two grammars” (1991, p. 112) to contrast with *monocompetence*, the state of mind with only one grammar. He maintains that language knowledge of the L2 user is dif-



ferent from that of the monolingual. He has consolidated research in first- and second-language acquisition to show that “the multicompetent individual approaches language differently in terms of metalinguistic awareness; multicompetence has an effect on other parts of cognition” (1992, p. 564) resulting in a greater metalinguistic awareness and a better cognitive processing; and that “multicompetent speakers think differently from monolinguals, at least in some areas of linguistic awareness” (1992, p. 565). *Multi-competence*, in short, is a different state of mind.

Citing the naturalness, smoothness, and comprehensibility of code switching among bilingual speakers, and the ease with which they borrow lexical items from the known languages as clear evidence in favor of holistic multicompetence, Cook suggests that the applied linguistics profession cannot ignore the compound state of mind of the L2 learner. As Brown, Malmkjaer, and Williams (1996) suggest, there are at least two senses—one theoretical and another practical—in which the notion of multicompetence is of relevance. First, “it is independent of the debate over the role of universal grammar in adult second language acquisition. The issue is whether the polyglot’s language systems are completely independent” (p. 56). Second, from a teaching point of view, the notion “advocates a change in philosophy concerning such issues as the ‘target’ for second language acquisition (which cannot by definition be monolingual competence). It challenges the idea that the learners’ L1 should be kept out of the classroom . . .” (p. 56). A further implication, according to them, is that “if an atmosphere is created in which the first language competence of an individual is recognized and valued then this might potentially have an important affective and motivational impact on their approach to learning a second language” (p. 56). Clearly, much work needs to be done in this area of competence.

The fact of the matter is that for all the impressive strides made in the last half century, the concept of *language competence* (mono- or multi-) still remains “a puzzle wrapped in mystery inside an enigma.” First of all, we are trying to decipher an internal psychological mechanism to which we do not have direct access, and to analyze it only through its external manifestation in terms of language behavior. Besides, the concept itself is too divergent to capture neatly, too elusive to define elegantly, and too complicated to apply effectively. Added to that is the tendency to conflate distinctions and to confuse terms, with the result that the term *competence* “has been used so widely and so divergently in so many different contexts that it has ceased to have any precise meaning” (Taylor, 1988, p. 159). Take for instance, the following short passage from Bachman and Palmer’s 1996 book on language testing, and notice how words like competence, knowledge, ability, strategies are used:

The model of language ability that we adopt in this book is essentially that proposed by Bachman (1990), who defines language ability as involving two components: language competence, or what we will call *language knowledge*, and *strategic competence*, which we will describe as a set of metacognitive strategies. It is this combination of language knowledge and metacognitive strategies that provides language users with the ability, or capacity, to create and interpret discourse, either in responding to tasks on language tests, or in non-test language use. (p. 67, italics in original)

Such conceptual and terminological ambiguities abound in the literature.

### 1.2.2. Areas of Knowledge/Ability

As the field of applied linguistics waits for the conceptual complexity of competence to be sorted out, I think it is prudent to use less problematic and less loaded terms in order to make sense of the theoretical concepts and pedagogic precepts that have a bearing on classroom learning and teaching. To that end, I try as far as possible to use the terms that are already in circulation, modifying and extending the usage of some of them if necessary. Let me begin with language knowledge and language ability.

Several scholars have written about knowledge and ability from theoretical as well as pedagogic perspectives (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Bialystok, 1982; Widdowson, 1989). Without going into details about their arguments or their differences, it may be simply stated that *language knowledge* is what is in the mind of the language users, and when they use it appropriately to achieve their communicative purpose in a given context, they exhibit their *language ability*. As Widdowson (1989) has observed, “knowledge can be characterized in terms of degrees of analyzability, ability can be characterized in terms of degrees of accessibility” (p. 132). In other words, language ability involves “knowledge systems on the one hand and control of these systems on the other” (Bialystok & Sharwood-Smith, 1985, p. 106). It is, of course, possible to posit different types of knowledge. At a broader level, Anderson (1983), for instance, distinguishes between *declarative knowledge* which relates to knowledge about the language system, and *procedural knowledge* which relates to knowledge of how to use the language system. What this observation indicates is that a language learner develops a knowledge of knowledge, and a knowledge of ability, and that the two are closely linked.

At a more specific, and decidedly pedagogic, level, Bachman and Palmer (1996), based on Bachman (1990), provide the following list of areas of language knowledge. They do so with particular reference to language testing, but, their framework can easily be extended to language learning and teaching as well.

*Organizational Knowledge*

(how utterances or sentences and texts are organized)

*Grammatical Knowledge*

(how individual utterances or sentences are organized)

Knowledge of vocabulary

Knowledge of syntax

Knowledge of phonology/graphology

*Textual Knowledge*

(how utterances or sentences are organized to form texts)

Knowledge of cohesion

Knowledge of rhetorical or conversational organization

*Pragmatic Knowledge*

(how utterances or sentences and texts are related to the communicative goals of the language user and to the features of the language use setting)

*Functional Knowledge*

(how utterances or sentences and texts are related to the communicative goals of the language users)

Knowledge of ideational functions

Knowledge of manipulative functions

Knowledge of heuristic functions

Knowledge of imaginative functions

*Sociolinguistic Knowledge*

(how utterances or sentences and texts are related to features of the language use setting)

Knowledge of dialects/varieties

Knowledge of registers

Knowledge of natural or idiomatic expressions

Knowledge of cultural references and figures of speech

(Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 68)

To this list of knowledge areas, Bachman and Palmer (1996) add strategic competence, which includes metacognitive strategies of (a) goal setting, that is, deciding what one is going to do; (b) assessment, that is, taking stock of what is needed, what one has to work with, and how well one has done; and (c) planning, that is, deciding how to use what one has. For them, the areas of knowledge and strategic competence together constitute language ability.

In spite of all the conceptual and terminological ambiguities one finds in the literature, language competence is generally seen as a combination of language knowledge and language ability. There is, however, a tendency to treat knowledge and ability as dichotomies. It would be wrong to do so because of their complex connectivity. Trying to separate them is, in a sense,

trying to separate the dance from the dancer, the art from the artist. Halliday (1978) is one of the very few who has consistently rejected the dichotomy between competence and performance or between knowing and doing. He states unequivocally: "There is no difference between knowing a language and knowing how to use it" (p. 229). For purposes of learning and teaching, in particular, it is better to treat them as two sides of the same coin. Therefore, in this book, I use the terms *knowledge* and *ability* as one integrated component and indicate that integration by joining them with a slash: *knowledge/ability*. By doing so, I avoid using the problematic term, *competence*.

Furthermore, recall that serious concerns have been expressed about various components of competence mainly because of a lack of their interdependencies and distinctiveness. I would, therefore, argue that it is beneficial to collapse different types of competence already outlined into two major classifications identified long ago by Chomsky, namely, *grammatical* competence and *pragmatic* competence. However, in light of all the advancement we have made in our understanding of language as system, language as discourse and language as ideology, we have to attribute certain additional characteristics to these two umbrella terms. Instead of the term, *grammatical*, which is not commonly seen to include phonological and semantic elements of the language although Chomsky does include them, I prefer to use the word, *linguistic*, and retain the term, *pragmatic* as is (see Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, for a similar use). And, as I mentioned in the previous paragraph, I use the term *knowledge/ability* instead of *competence*.

So, to clear at least part of the terminological confusion, let me provide an operational definition of some of the terms I employ. In this book, the term *language knowledge/ability* is used to refer to the level of overall language know-how that a competent language user has, or a language learner seeks to have. The overall language knowledge/ability is considered to have two interrelated dimensions: *linguistic knowledge/ability* and *pragmatic knowledge/ability*. In this scenario, *language development* involves the development of linguistic knowledge/ability and pragmatic knowledge/ability. In order to develop the desired level of linguistic and pragmatic knowledge/ability, the learner, of course, has to make use of all possible learning strategies as well as communication strategies.

To elaborate further, linguistic knowledge/ability includes the knowledge/ability of phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic features of a language. It treats language as system. It entails both implicit and explicit knowledge *and* control of semantico-grammatical categories of language. Pragmatic knowledge/ability includes the knowledge/ability of language use in a textually coherent and contextually appropriate manner. To that extent, it treats language as discourse. But, as I use it here, this dimen-

sion also includes the knowledge/ability to intelligently link the word with the world, that is, to be critically conscious of the way language is manipulated by the forces of power and domination. In that sense, it also includes aspects of language as ideology.

In collapsing various types of competence, and in opting for the two-dimensional linguistic and pragmatic knowledge/ability, I am not minimizing the importance of all the insightful contributions that have been made by various scholars. Undoubtedly, such knowledge production is essential for any academic discipline to make progress. My intention here is to offer a simple frame of reference that can be used to clear certain conceptual and terminological clouds in order to shed some light on the process of language learning and the practice of language teaching.

### 1.3. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the fundamental concepts of language and the pedagogic precepts that could be possibly derived from them. I discussed the concepts of (a) language as system that focuses on the phonological, semantic, and syntactic elements of language; (b) language as discourse, which pertains mainly to the coherent and cohesive features that unite the disparate systemic elements of language, as well as features of language use in communicative contexts; and (c) language as ideology, which deals mainly with issues of how the social and political forces of power and domination impact on language structures and language use. The field of applied linguistics has invested much of its effort to explore language as system and, to some extent, language as discourse, but has virtually ignored language as ideology until very recently.

I also outlined certain pedagogic precepts about components of competence as well as areas of knowledge/ability. We learned that the introduction of various types of competence has actually advanced our understanding of the systemic and discursal functions of language. It was, however, suggested that for the specific purpose of discussing issues related to language learning and teaching, it is better to collapse various components of competence into two broad categories: linguistic knowledge/ability and pragmatic knowledge/ability.

In the next chapter, we take a close look at how and to what extent the theoretical concepts and pedagogic precepts have influenced the formulation of language-learning theories and practices. Following that, in chapter 3, we see how the concepts of language and the theories of learning have contributed to shape the instructional processes and strategies in the language classroom.