A Discourse Perspective on Advanced Spoken Language Proficiency

以语段为划分高级口语水平的依据

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Abstract

Language proficiency can be defined in a variety of ways, typically in terms of structure-based accuracy and fluency. A common structural benchmark used to define language proficiency, for example, involves inventory and level of vocabulary. Similar skills and structural benchmarks may include syntactic complexity, oral fluency and the like (see, for example, the ACTFL Guidelines 1999). In the case of Chinese, in addition to the usual structural properties used to define ALP, there are language-specific criteria used. For example, a common way of defining ALP for Chinese has to do with the number of Chinese characters that a learner can recognize (e.g. 1500-2000 characters, as opposed to 1000-1500 for the intermediate level). While recognizing the necessity of using such skills and structural criteria to define language proficiency, in this paper I take a discourse-based approach to this issue. A discourse-based approach emphasizes the importance of social interaction and communicative competence in the definition of language proficiency, especially advanced spoken language proficiency. With data from conversational discourse, I illustrate why the following properties should be considered critical elements for ALP:

- Sensitivity to interactional moves;
- Sensitivity to discourse cohesion and coherence;
- Sensitivity to information structuring;
- The ability to negotiate epistemic and affective stances;
- The ability to exploit alternative resources in communicatively challenging situations.

Data for this study come from natural interactions among native Mandarin speakers. For the purpose of comparison, learner data from the classroom are also presented. Implication for language instruction and material development will be discussed, with illustrations from the outcome of a recently completed US Department of Education funded project on advanced language proficiency.