

Linguistic competence and narrative competence in advanced L2 learners in an initial teacher education programme*

Competencias lingüística y narrativa en estudiantes avanzados de L2 en un programa de formación inicial docente

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ABSTRACT

Through an empirical observational quantitative-descriptive research method, this study aims at examining the level of proficiency of EFL learners with regard to oral L2 narrative production and compare these indicators to the level of linguistic proficiency measured by a formal standardised test, in the context of an English teacher education programme. The results suggest that the nature of the tasks presented in standardised exams and the administration conditions may have a negative impact on EFL learners' narrative performance, revealing that there is a degree of divergence in the level of proficiency of EFL learners when producing L2 oral narratives in this context.

Keywords: language proficiency, linguistic competence, narrative competence, L2 development.

RESUMEN

A través de un método empírico observacional cuantitativo-descriptivo, este estudio apunta a examinar el nivel de competencia

Palabras clave: competencia lingüística,

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en aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) en relación a la producción de narrativas orales de L2 y contrastar estos indicadores con el nivel de competencia lingüística mostrado por una prueba estandarizada, en una carrera de pedagogía en inglés. Los resultados sugieren que la naturaleza de las actividades y las condiciones presentadas en las pruebas estandarizadas podrían desfavorecer el desempeño narrativo de los aprendices de ILE, revelando que existe un grado de divergencia en el nivel de competencia al producir narrativas orales en L2.

competencia
narrativa,
desarrollo de L2.

Introduction

Traditionally, studies in second language acquisition (SLA) in formal instructional settings address the capacity of advanced language learning and use (by EFL learners). Among the many critical issues addressed by EFL educators, the extent to which EFL learners progress in the linguistic developmental path, in order to become advanced users of a second (L2) or foreign (FL) language, seems to be of paramount importance. Additionally, it seems to be relevant to characterise not only the final attainment of advanced users across the phonological, morphosyntactic, and pragmatic systems of the target language in terms of the repertoire of form-meaning associations, but also the capacity of the learners for advanced-level language use in socially situated contexts. In this sense, a thorough characterisation of the profile of an idealised advanced learner is essential to better understand advanced level proficiency in these particular settings.

In the field of SLA, the term *language proficiency* (henceforth LP) has been generally defined and come to be used as “a person’s overall competence and ability to perform in L2” (Thomas, 1994, p. 330). From early models of LP based on the notions of linguistic knowledge and language skills (Lado, 1961; Carrol, 1972 [1961]), the role of situational context in language use has been recognised as central. In turn, as a response to Noam Chomsky, who made the distinction between observable performance and an underlying linguistic competence, Hymes (1972) coined the notion of communicative competence, highlighting the relevance of the relationship between language use and the communicative context in which communication takes place. In a similar line, Widdowson (1978) illustrated the same dichotomy by means of presenting the distinction between ‘usage’ (knowledge of the system) and ‘use’ (communication).

Following Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980) developed a model of communicative competence based on specific grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic components. Later, Bachman and Palmer (1996) proposed a model of ‘language ability’, distinguishing organizational language knowledge (grammatical and textual knowledge), pragmatic language knowledge (functional and sociolinguistic knowledge), and a component of strategic competence (metacognitive components and strategies). In a similar line, Hulstijn (2011) characterizes

L2 proficiency as a combination of knowledge of how to use language forms appropriate to the communicative situation (including pragmatic knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge, knowledge of discourse organization). More recently, the concept of LP has been conceptualised in two dimensions: the dimension of basic language cognition (BLC) and high language cognition (HLC) and the dimension of core and peripheral components.

Thus, addressing the capacity of advanced language learning and use (by L2 learners) implies acknowledging the distinctions made above (competence/performance, usage/use, language knowledge/pragmatic knowledge/strategic competence, basic language cognition/high language cognition) and the need to reorganize EFL assessment processes in consideration of the two different levels of representation. Considering this, these dichotomies seem to pose a challenge to EFL instructors in formal instructional settings, in order to explore the extent to which an advanced level of linguistic competence correlates to an advanced level language proficiency in the performance of advanced tasks.

The present study aims at characterising the level of linguistic competence and narrative competence in advanced L2 undergraduate EFL learners in a formal instructional setting, in order to explore the potential relationship between the two types of competence. For the purposes of this study, narrative competence is defined as a relevant aspect of advanced proficiency as it constitutes instances of language use embedded in social action and is determined by expectations about form, content, and development in specific communities of practices. The aim of the research is, consequently, to identify and characterize the level of language proficiency of the participants in terms of communicative and narrative competence in a group of 8 undergraduate students in a teacher training programme in a State-funded university in Chile. In order to collect data, participants were asked to complete the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) to measure their level of linguistic competence according to CEF and, additionally, they were asked to complete a series of narrative tasks in the context of an interview, aiming at measuring their level of language proficiency in oral production.

Theoretical framework

Language proficiency

Language proficiency (LP) was initially proposed as a two-dimensional model containing components of linguistic knowledge along one axis (knowledge of lexis, morphology, syntax and phonology/orthography), matched with the four language skills, as in the models of Lado (1961) and Carroll (1972[1961]). These initial models did not take into account the fact that listening, reading, speaking, and writing are communicative situations, although Carroll acknowledged later the role of situational context: “the learning of second languages requires both the acquisition of knowledge about rules and the formation of the habits described by the rules. (...) language habits must be made contingent upon (...) situational meanings” (1981, pp. 463-464).

A well-known distinction between observable performance and an underlying unobservable linguistic competence was proposed by Noam Chomsky (1965), defining competence as the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of language. In 1972, Hymes coined the term communicative competence, as a response to Chomsky’s narrowly linguistic definition of it, drawing attention to the relevance of the relationship between language use and the communicative context in which communication takes place. Then, for Hymes, communicative competence was composed of knowledge of the language system and also a knowledge of the appropriateness of language use according to the communicative situation. In the same manner, a similar distinction was presented by Widdowson (1978), who distinguished between usage, represented as the knowledge of the system, and use, represented as communication.

In agreement with Hymes’ ideas, Canale & Swain (1980) developed a model of communicative competence based on specific grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic components, being grammatical competence defined as “knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar, semantics and phonology” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 29). Regarding sociolinguistic competence, the authors state that it is “made up of two sets of rules: sociocultural rules and rules of discourse” (p. 30), while sociocultural rules are involved with the appropriate use of propositions and communicative functions within a given sociocultural context, the rules of discourse

are related to the cohesion and coherence of groups of utterances. This classification also distinguishes strategic competence as the ability to use verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to compensate for any difficulties in communication coming from performance variables or insufficient competence.

Later, Bachman & Palmer (1996) proposed a model of 'language ability,' distinguishing organizational language knowledge (grammatical and textual knowledge), pragmatic language knowledge (functional and sociolinguistic knowledge), and a component of strategic competence (metacognitive components and strategies).

While a variety of definitions of the term LP have been suggested, this paper will use the definition stated by Hulstijn (2015), who defines LP as both knowledge of language and the ability to access, retrieve and use that knowledge in listening, speaking, reading or writing. Furthermore, this author also introduces the idea of two kinds of language ability: Basic Language Cognition (henceforth BLC) and Higher Language Cognition (henceforth HLC), recognising core and peripheral components, as well.

Basic language cognition and higher language cognition

Both BLC and HLC contain the term *cognition*, which can be defined as a neural network, containing both the representation and use of information, and both knowledge and skill, different from the concept of competence in the generative school (Hulstijn, 2015).

At this point, it seems worthwhile contrasting the labels *basic* and *higher*, since these may be misleading terminology. As Hulstijn (2015) clarifies, the word *basic* in BLC refers to commonalities that L1 users have in terms of language, basic to all adult L1 users, regardless of age, literacy, or educational level. On the other hand, *higher* should be understood as *extended*, rather than better than *basic*, actually being complementary to BLC.

As suggested before, BLC represents the language cognition that all native speakers have in common, while HLC is the domain where differences between native speakers can be observed (Hulstijn, 2015).

As proposed by Hulstijn (2011), BLC features the following components: 1) implicit, unconscious knowledge of phonetics, prosody,

phonology, morphology and syntax; 2) explicit conscious knowledge of lexis, in combination with 3) the automaticity processing of those types of knowledge. Interestingly, BLC admits only frequent lexical items and grammatical structures, the ones that are common to all adult L1 users despite their age, literacy, or educational level. Another significant aspect of BLC is that, as reception and production of speech are considered to be a more fundamental human attribute than literacy skills, BLC circumscribes only to those ones. The author has also shown HLC as a complement on BLC, highlighting, on the one hand, that understood or produced utterances in HLC contain low-frequency lexical items or uncommon morpho-syntactic structures, and, on the other hand, HLC utterances apply to written and spoken language. He further adds that; no simple every-day topics are addressed in HLC discourse.

Core and peripheral components of language proficiency

According to Hulstijn (2015), several studies have found one consistent result that shows that measures of knowledge of lexis and grammar were remarkably associated with performance in all four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) across L1 users and L2 users. These findings have served well for the author to initially support a model of L2 proficiency, identifying core and peripheral components. Whereas core components consist of linguistic knowledge and the speed with which this knowledge is processed, peripheral components encompass interactional ability (general, not specific to a particular language), strategic competence of how to keep verbal communication going on under adverse conditions or with limited linguistic knowledge, metalinguistic knowledge, and knowledge of the characteristics of various types of oral and written discourse (Hulstijn, 2015, p. 41).

Then, it can be seen that Canale & Swain (1980) and Bachman & Palmer (1996) competences exist in the periphery of language proficiency in Hulstijn's model. The core-periphery distinction of BLC-HLC theory renders the following empirical claim: successful communication will almost always depend on linguistic knowledge, while peripheral competences will play crucial roles only in some types of verbal communication, acknowledging a wide diversity of situations of verbal communication (Hulstijn, 2015).

Hulstijn (2015) states that individual differences can be explained by the core-periphery distinction, which seems pertinent for L2 teaching and testing. In fact, analysing to what extent L2 users, particularly post-puberty learners, can acquire BLC in their L2, it is possible to say that BLC and HLC can be identified, particularly regarding ultimate attainment. For instance, in terms of grammar, to produce error-free spontaneous unmonitored speech is extremely hard for post-puberty L2 users, even after many years of exposure and productive use of L2 (Van Boxtel, Bongaerts & Coppen, 2005).

Therefore, BLC seems to be attainable by late L2 learners when referring to vocabulary and most grammatical structures, however it appears not to be attainable regarding pronunciation or the production of some grammatical features in spontaneous unmonitored speech. In contrast, concerning HLC, it can be said that late L2 learners can become as proficient as L1 users, when sharing the same intellectual, educational, professional and cultural profile, even if presenting flaws in their L2 BLC. Because of this, it is reasonable to think that an L2 user of a relatively high educational profile could be more proficient than many low educational profile L1 users (Hulstijn, 2015)

Narrative competence

In order to become meaningful in a linguistic community, narratives constitute a means by which second language learners make sense of their experiences, including functions such as presentation of self, organisation of autobiographical memory, socialisation of children into cultural membership, and mediation of ways of thinking about problems and difficulties. In this context, the construct narrative refers to “all types of discourse in which event structured material is shared with readers or listeners, including fictional stories, personal narratives, accounts and recounts of events (real or imagined)” (Mistry, 1993, 208). In the light of this conceptualisation, L2 narrative competence refers to L2 users’ ability to interpret, construct, and perform personal and fictional narratives similarly to a reference group of native speakers of the target language in age, gender, and socioeconomic and educational background (McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

According to Byrnes, Weger, & Sprang (2006), advanced L2 users should be able to provide lengthy and coherent narrations, with ease,

fluency, and accuracy; exhibiting good control of aspect; a variety of narrative strategies, such as paraphrasing, circumlocution, or illustration, and ability to separate main ideas from supporting information through the use of syntactic and lexical devices and intonational features. Thus, following Byrnes et al., narrative competence implies the knowledge and use of specific genre-appropriate narrative components, including knowledge of conventional culturally-related narrative structures in the target language and specific knowledge on how to appeal to these structures in context. In a similar line, De Fina (2012) views narrative not only as a text-type that involves a focus on verbal/linguistic aspects, but also as having textual properties that may be culture-specific.

Advanced L2 capacities

In the last decades there has been growing interest in characterising the ability to use a second or foreign language (L2) at advanced levels by non-native L2 users. Several attempts have been made with the purpose of theorising about the presence of a critical period, due to maturation roughly circumscribed by puberty, beyond which L2 competent users/learners could no longer process linguistic stimuli in the fashion that enables earlier learners to reach ability levels associated with nativeness (Birdsong, 1999; Long, 2003; Byrnes et al., 2006). Some preliminary attempts to conceptualise the construct of advanced proficiency characterise it from the perspective of situated language use in context (e. g. through register and genre), highlighting sociocultural and sociolinguistic considerations of appropriateness (Byrnes, et al., 2006). Thus, advanced L2 learner discourse is believed to generate its own space, reflecting the pragmatic conventions neither of the L1 nor of the L2 community through the interaction among advanced communicative participants (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005).

Evidence reveals that additional features of advanced proficiency have to be understood from the perspective of key notions, such as literacy, situated discourse abilities, and the dialogical nature of advanced language performance. According to Byrnes (2009), the performance range within advanced proficiency might then be imagined through the following progression: (1) recounting, reporting, and narrative or story genres that focus on the verbal system and express Par-

ticipants, Processes, and Circumstances in real-life situations, first in simplex, then in complex clauses that move from paratactic to hypotactic and embedded clauses; (2) genres that privilege more metaphorical construals of life, realized through increasing lexical density and greater syntactic complexity, with human participants engaging with public and institutional concerns, values, and beliefs that express comparative, contrastive, and issue-oriented stances in terms of logical relationships; (3) genres that feature both human and abstract actors in created textual spaces by using verbal processes, chunks, collocations, and phrasal stems that can lay out logical arguments in an increasingly greater range of genres and disciplinary and content areas.

Advanced abilities can also be described through two major forms of dialogicality. Oral language use manifests the overt dialogicality of conversations; in addition, advanced abilities comprise the covert dialogicality of intratextual aspects of coherence and cohesion, and of various forms of intertextual reference. In line with Bakhtin's notion of the centrally dialogical nature of language, Wertsch (2006) characterizes advanced forms of language performance by referring to language users' ability to incorporate the complex intertextualities that make up what is commonly referred to as cultural literacy. Even more, advancedness involves the ability to "reflect the voice of others, including entire groups, who are not present in the immediate speech situation" (p. 61). Advanced forms of language use can therefore also be seen as a multivoiced language performance, a notion that is only heightened in a multilingual and multicultural world.

Models of narrative analysis

The canonical model of narrative analysis proposed by Labov & Waletzky (1997[1967]) is based on the premise that narrative discourse falls into six discrete sections:

- (i) Abstract: section that presents the summarised plot of the narrative
- (ii) Orientation: section that sets the background for the listener
- (iii) Complication: section that presents the main events and relates the sequence of events
- (iv) Evaluation: section that introduces the point of the story or the reason why it is told

- (v) Resolution: section that relates how the events sort themselves out
- (vi) Coda: section that bridges the gap between narrated and narrating time

As a response to the canonical model of narrative analysis designed by Labov & Waletzky (1967), Martin & Plum (1997) present three alternative approaches to the analysis of narrative production: (i) *recounts*, (ii) *anecdotes*, and (iii) *exemplums*. Recounts deal mainly with unproblematic narratives structured as *orientation-record of events-reorientation*. In turn, anecdotes deal with remarkable events aiming at generating a reaction of the target listener. Exemplums deal with judgements about noteworthy incidents and the central orientation of narrative production is to get the approval or disapproval of the target listener.

Despite the fact that these three models constitute an updated version of the analytical model presented by Labov & Waletzky in 1967, the potential central role of the target listener, determined by the nature of the narrative production in these three approaches, constitutes a major drawback to adopting these analytical approaches, because of the neutral role of the target listener (examiner) in the elicitation of L2 oral narrative in formal assessment settings.

Fluency

In his seminal paper on the topic, Fillmore (1979) defines fluency as the ability to talk at length with a minimum of pauses and conceptualises the term as the ability to package messages easily in “semantically dense” sentences without recourse to lots of filler material. Adding a social component, the term ‘fluency’ is defined as the ability to speak appropriately in different kinds of social contexts. Complementary discussions approach this construct as the ability to express any idea in the L2 that one can also express in the L1, or to the ability to speak with little or no accent in the L2, or to speak with few grammatical errors (Wood, 2001; Riggenbach, 2000).

A cognitive approach to fluency

According to Segalowitz (2010), fluency in a second language is an observable characteristic of real time speech behaviour, which is the product of the systematic use over an extended period of time through socially

contextualised, communicative activities. In this context, exposure to elements in the target language (input repetition) and massive production practice (output repetition) are critical for attaining L2 proficiency and fluency in the target language (Segalowitz & Hulstijn, 2005) and are considered as essential factors to enhance language development by generating conditions for processing skills to become automatic.

In turn, Bybee (2008, 220) claims that grammar is an “automatized behaviour” which is the product of frequent repetition. It is thus generally accepted that L2 mastery requires automatization, and a major route to automaticity (Long, 2003). In the field of SLA, approaches to cognitive fluency highlight the central idea that automaticity enhances the fluidity of cognitive processing, therefore enhancing fluency (DeKeyser, 2001; N. Ellis, 2002; Hulstijn, 2001; N. Segalowitz, 2003; N. Segalowitz & Hulstijn, 2005.) A key aspect to consider is that cognitive processing does not normally develop exclusively from formal instruction, but a strong component of intensive social communication is required for these processes to become fluent (Schneider & Chein, 2003). What the literature suggests is that formal instruction can lead to high levels of lexical *knowledge* and grammatical *accuracy*, but cognitive fluency in processing this knowledge cannot be acquired without using language in social contexts.

Standardised assessment of language proficiency

A central issue considered by language testers in the 1970s was whether language ability was a unitary trait or partially divisible traits. This distinction was a particular object of inquiry for language testers trying to develop tests consistently backed up by informed theoretical frameworks. Thus, initial explorations aimed at investigating the construct validity of proficiency tests designed around a language ability framework (communicative competence) proposed by Canale & Swain (1980). In this context, Bachman & Palmer (1982) claimed that the most reliable model of language proficiency assessment must include formal and objective instances of measurement of grammatical/pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic competence, showing that language ability is intrinsically multidimensional.

In the context of language proficiency assessment, it is imperative to refer to the Common European Framework (henceforth CEF), which

offers a thorough description of linguistic performance achieved by foreign language learners. Even though CEF was originally intended for Europe, it has become a referent in different countries where foreign languages are taught (Brown & Lee, 2015): Chile, among others.

In general terms, CEF classifies linguistic performance in six main different levels, going from Basic User (A1 - A2), through Independent User (B1 - B2), to Proficient User (C1 - C2). Between Basic and Proficient User, the CEF offers sub-divisions called “the plus-levels”, such as A2+, B1+ and B2+, although narrowing levels to this point can be highly subjective.

As language is not a neutral instrument of thought, but a contextualised one, communication arises in particular situations, being the form and the content of the communication the result of that situation. In that sense, language is set in particular ‘domains’ or spheres of social interaction, being these domains indeterminate for the very reason of their contextualisation.

According to CEF, progress in language learning “is most clearly evidenced in the learner’s ability to engage in observable language activities and to operate communication strategies” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 57). Consistently, activities and strategies are presented as the following:

1. Productive activities and strategies: they can be exemplified as reading a written text aloud, acting out a rehearsed role, or singing, to mention a few, which can be carried out when giving information or instructions, or when addressing an audience. In written production, such as in creative writing or in reports and essays, activities include making notes, writing personal letters, completing forms and questionnaires.
2. Receptive activities and strategies: listening and reading activities include strategies like searching for specific information, strategies for detailed understanding or implications.
3. Interactive activities and strategies: in spoken interactive activities, the user acts both as speaker and listener with another/some other interlocutor/s, construing conjointly conversational discourse. It is important to note that reception and production strategies are constantly employed during interaction.

4. Mediating activities: In these activities, the language user acts as an intermediary between interlocutors who cannot understand each other directly, as it usually takes place between speakers of different languages.
5. Nonverbal communication. According to CEF, nonverbal communication involves practical actions, paralinguistic, and paratextual features. Practical actions accompany language activities, usually in face-to-face oral interaction.

Methodology

In the context of the present study of the relationship between the linguistic competence and the narrative competence in advanced L2 EFL learners, an empirical observational quantitative descriptive research method has been implemented. The participants' ability to produce L2 oral narrative at an advanced level C1 (CEF) was investigated in order to characterise the narrative discourse in terms of the expected linguistic range for the level and the organization of the narratives. The relationship between the linguistic competence and the narrative competence in advanced L2 EFL learners was analysed in order to explore the rates on consistency of these competences in the context of a narrative task conceptualised as an advanced foreign language capacity.

Sample

The sample consists of 32 L2 oral narratives produced by 8 EFL university undergraduates who are formally enrolled in the English teacher-training programme in a state-funded university. Regarding their level of English proficiency, all the subjects are advanced learners as demonstrated by their grammatical/formal and communicative skills and determined by means of the administration of a standardised assessment instrument: Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT). Additionally, all the subjects have successfully completed the same number of hours of formal instruction: 72 hours in such areas as English language and communication, and 48 hours in English morphology and syntax, and English phonology.

Data collection procedures

The participants in the study completed the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) by the instructors in charge of the communication course in their

capacity as course instructors. Each participant completed the test in a digital format in an online session. Additionally, all the participants took an oral test in order to assess their speaking performance in a controlled context. The participants' individual performance was assessed through the elicitation of the natural expression of ideas and recounting of personal experiences. Thus, the set tasks consisted of two sections: (i) a set of general warming-up questions and (ii) a set of narrative tasks aiming at eliciting authentic narratives based on participants' personal experiences.

The data was elicited by means of the completion of three ninety-second oral narrative tasks, aiming at activating narrative skills in a relevant pragmatic and semantic context and relevant evidence of the proficiency level of the participants in the form of their temporal and aspectual choices. All the sample narratives were analysed according to the following procedural scheme:

Stage 1

In order to operationalise the measurement, instances of use of C1 linguistic features (henceforth C1LF) were identified in the narratives produced by the participants. The frequency of occurrence of these C1LF was measured in relation with the utterances produced in the narratives, generating a rate of C1LF per utterance. The 24 samples were analysed with the purpose of identifying instances of use of C1LF, in order to isolate these tokens accurately. Similarly, all the narratives were measured in terms of a rate of C1LF per utterance.

Stage 2

In order to operationalize the measurement of narrative proficiency, instances of use of 'narrative clauses' (henceforth NC) were identified in the narratives produced by the participants. The frequency of occurrence of these NC was measured in relation with the utterances produced by the participants, considering that not every clause occurring in narratives qualifies as a narrative clause. This measurement generated a rate of NC per utterance for each sample that provides insights at their semantic temporal sequence.

Stage 3

To characterise the internal structure of the narratives produced by the participants, all the narrative clauses identified in each sample were

analysed and labelled according to the model of oral narrative structure proposed by Labov & Waletzky (1997[1967]). All the samples were analysed in order to find pervasive narrative patterns.

Stage 4

Additionally, all the transcriptions were analysed in order to identify non-linguistic features of the narrative discourse in the context of this elicitation process and considering the characteristic of the elicitation tasks. In this respect, aspects like the silence spans, the frequency of hesitation expressed in verbal and non-verbal terms and the use of communication strategies were identified in order to characterize their potential in the generation of narrative discourse.

Results

For the methodological and analytical purposes of the study, the quantitative results have been calculated by quantifying the frequency of occurrence of narrative clauses in order to characterise the expressions of temporal sequences through a framework of temporal succession of events (Semino & Short 2004, p20), the linguistic forms associated to level C1 (CEF) presented by the British Council EAQUALS, an inventory of language points related to the proficiency levels according to CEF (2010), and the model of narrative analysis proposed by Labov (1972).

Narrative clauses

Following the concept of 'narrative clause' presented by Norrick (2000), which defines these discrete units as the clauses used to match events/actions in a temporal sequence of events and also the fact that not every clause occurring in narratives qualifies as a narrative clause as only clauses that are separated by a temporal juncture can be considered narrative clauses, the analysis of the transcriptions reveals that the narratives produced by the participants can be characterised by a balanced frequency of occurrence of narrative clauses supported by a balanced amount of non-narrative clausal material which serves as linguistic background for the narratives. General results reveal that 215 clauses, out of a total of 508 clauses produced by the subjects, can be classified as narrative clauses (42 %).

Table 1

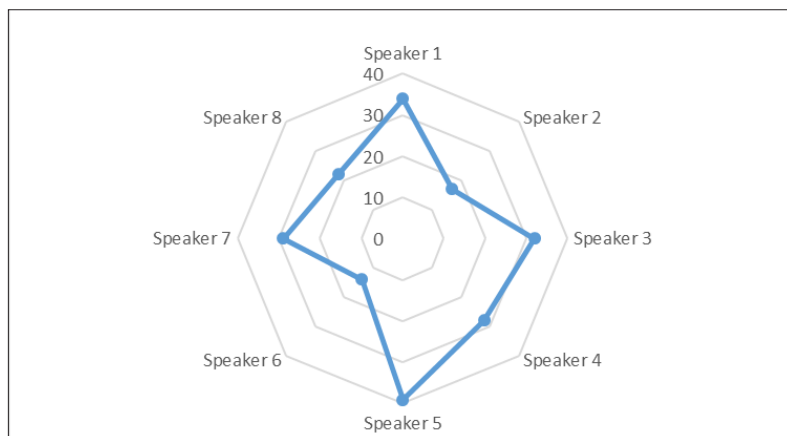
Measurement of standard deviation (S) and media (M) in the production of L2 oral narratives by advanced EFL learners

	Narrative Clauses
Speaker 1	34
Speaker 2	17
Speaker 3	32
Speaker 4	28
Speaker 5	39
Speaker 6	14
Speaker 7	29
Speaker 8	22
Total	215
Media (M)	26,8
Standard Deviation (S)	8,41

Source: Produced by the author.

The measurement of standard deviation (8,41) reveals that the data tends to be homogeneously dispersed around and close to the mean, in terms of the number of narrative clauses produced by the subjects. In turn, the data also reveals that there are two values which present a relatively higher deviation from the mean with values that are symmetrically above and below it. In terms of the analysis of the production of narrative clauses, the data shows that 25 % of the subjects are over 5 standard deviations away from the mean (26,87), 25 % of the subjects were below 5 standard deviations away from the mean. In turn, data reveals that 12,5 % of the subjects were 5 standard deviations over the mean and 12,5 % of the subjects were 5 standard deviations below the mean. The remaining subjects are 2 or less standard deviations away from the mean. Therefore, the data is clustered around the mean homogeneously and symmetrically and the rate of production of narrative clauses is homogeneously distributed among the subjects.

Figure 1
Degree of dispersion in the production of L2 oral narrative clauses by advanced EFL learners



Source: Produced by the author.

Generally speaking, the most remarkable result to emerge from the data is that there seem to be task-related constraints that may affect L2 oral narrative performance, which may generate conditions for subjects to simplify discourse in terms of the production of complex narrative constructions. The fact that there is no direct correlation between the C1 level of the subjects and the level of L2 oral narrative performance, as determined by rate of L2 narrative clause production, seems to constitute evidence for this divergence to be explained in terms of:

- (i) A developing stage of narrative competence in terms of the ability to produce L2 narratives, which results in oversimplified narrative production.
- (ii) A systematic use of strategies of avoidance due to the complexity of the L2 oral narrative tasks, which highlights initial evidence of L2 oral narrative competence as an advanced competence.

Evidence suggests that, in the linguistic narrative repertoire accessed, retrieved and used by these C1 L2 users, the expression of temporality seems to be dominant, generating the conditions for the overuse of simple preterite constructions, over more complex forms to express more advanced temporal semantic relationships. In this respect, respondents do not seem to be able to activate the concept of

temporal recency of the past event, which makes them favour the preterite forms. Similarly, a strategy of avoidance may lead these L2 users to overuse simple temporal expressions, over complex forms that express temporal and aspectual meanings.

In this context, L2 oral narrative production seems to be restricted to the expression of narrative events through the presentation of information in the form of a chronologically linear sequence of temporal events. Additionally, this oversimplified level of L2 oral production may be highly determined by the temporal restrictions of the narrative tasks through which storytelling is elicited and the absence of a sense of purpose for narrative production in their mental representation of temporal relationships.

Inventory of linguistic points related to C1

Following the inventory of language points related to C1 level, according to CEF presented by the British Council EAQUALS (North, Ortega & Sheehan, 2010), the analysis of the transcriptions reveals that the narratives produced by the participants can be characterised by (i) the overuse of the expression of temporality by means of simple tenses; (ii) the relative absence of expression of aspectuality, with the exception of limited tokens of progressive aspect; (iii) the overuse of the central coordinating conjunction 'and' as a linking device; (iv) the resulting absence of subordinating conjunctions establishing logical semantic relationships between clauses, and (v) the limited presence of nominal, adjective and adverbial clauses to expand clauses. The results for this section are shown in Table 2:

Table 2

Number of instances of occurrence of C1 linguistic features (CILF) in the production of L2 oral narratives by advanced EFL learners

Total number of clauses	Total number of clauses presenting C1 Linguistic Features (CILF's)
508	31 (6,1 %)

Source: Produced by the author.

After classifying and quantifying the instances of underuse of C1 features produced by Spanish speaking EFL learners, the results dem-

onstrate that there are 31 clauses which present empirical evidence of use of C1 linguistic features in the production of oral L2 narratives.

Narrative features

Following the model proposed by Labov (1972), the analysis of the transcriptions reveals that the narratives produced by the participants can be characterised by (i) the absence of the ‘abstract’ as a unit that presents the gist of the story (the abstract is actually presented in the instructions of the task), (ii) the pervasive occurrence of an orientation-complication-resolution pattern in the structure of the narratives produced by the participants, and (iii) the relative absence of ‘coda’ and ‘evaluation as units that present the point of view of the narrator. The results for this section are shown in Table 3:

Table 3
Number of instances of use of abstract, orientation, complication, resolution, evaluation and coda stages in the production of L2 oral narratives by advanced EFL learners in the advanced narrative elicitation tasks

Instances of abstract	Instances of orientation	Instances of complication	Instances of resolution	Instances of coda	Instances of evaluation
0/24	24/24	24/24	24/24	0/24	0/24

Source: Produced by the author.

Discussion

The most remarkable result to emerge from the analysis of the data is that the correlation between the linguistic competence and narrative competence of advanced EFL learners does not seem to be consistent. Findings confirm that oral narratives produced by the participants of this study do not present consistent evidence in terms of (i) frequency of use of narrative clauses core units in the expression of temporal sequences, (ii) frequency of use of C1LE, and (iii) incomplete narrative patterns. Thus, the participants’ ability to produce L2 oral narratives at an advanced level C1 (CEF) seems to be limited not only by linguistic factor related to their level of proficiency, but also by non-linguistic factors that include the complexity of the narrative task itself conceptualised as an advanced foreign language capacity and the restrictive characteristics of the exam-like narrative task as an elicitation technique.

In terms of the level of proficiency of the participants when producing L2 oral narratives, there is a clear degree of divergence between the level of proficiency measures in the standardised test and the level of proficiency in the completion of the narratives task. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the general index of frequency of occurrence of C1LF is 6,1 %, with 31 instances of use in a total of 508 utterances. As previously stated, this phenomenon can be characterised by (i) the overuse of the expression of temporality by means of simple tenses, (ii) the relative absence of expression of aspectuality, (iii) the overuse of the central coordinating conjunction 'and' as a linking device, (iv) the resulting absence of subordinating conjunctions establishing logical semantic relationships between clauses, and (v) the limited presence of nominal, adjective and adverbial clauses to expand clauses.

In this context, the single most conspicuous observation to emerge from the analysis of data relates to the fact that, in the production of L2 oral narratives, EFL users tend to express temporal sequences in a linear way with a strong focus on the expression of temporality, characterised by the overuse of the preterite construction. Additionally, it might be asserted that this overuse leads these EFL users to deactivate the concept of aspectual meanings like perfectively and progression, making them unable to express more complex relationships like temporal recency, temporal relationships between events, prior relevance and current relevance. Therefore, the mental representations seem to be semantically simplified.

Another pervasive phenomenon observed in the data related to the overuse of the coordinating conjunction 'and,' along with the lack of use of more complex subordinating conjunctions expressing more complex relationships in the sequences of temporal events. This finding seems to be coherent with Yule's proposal (1996) in the identification of specific uses of coordinating conjunctions in L2 narratives as pivotal units, not as logical connectors, but as the sequential expression that establishes a temporal sequence relationship between events.

From the perspective of the narrative component of the narrative samples, it is interesting to note that, despite the fact that they are not at a C1 level from a linguistic point of view, especially in terms of their syntactic and lexical range, there is an appropriate level of occurrence of narrative clauses expressing complex sequences of temporal events. The

semantic structure of the texts is structured along an a-then-b relation which is expressed in the actual sequence of narrative clauses referring to events that occurred one after the other being temporally juncture.

In turn, evidence reveals that there is a considerable proportion of 'non-narrative' clauses whose main functionality seems to lie on (i) the presentation of background information to the narrative texts or (ii) a communication strategy used by EFL learners in order to structure and organise ideas in the context of the L2 oral narrative task. Despite the fact that there is a high rate of non-narrative clauses to present background information, these cannot be characterised by the frequent occurrence of C1LF. This is not particularly surprising, given the fact that these non-narrative clauses tend to constitute discursive fillers characterised by the expression of incomplete ideas, the presence of reformulations and silence gaps.

In addition to analysing narrative samples in terms of C1LF and the frequency of occurrence of narrative clauses, EFL learners' performance in the production of L2 oral narratives was measured through the analysis of pervasive narrative structures of the samples, in terms of the presence of (i) abstract (summary), (ii) orientation (background), (iii) complication (main event), (iv) evaluation (point of the story), (v) resolution (result) and (vi) coda (return to present). The seminal Labovian model does not rule the construction of stories in conversation (Rhulemann, 2013), although it has been used initially as narrative proficiency measure, in order to complement the analysis of the narrative component of each sample and as a basis for streaming EFL learners into narrative level ability levels.

Each narrative sample was analysed following Labov's pattern, in order to identify potential regular patterns and the linguistic and non-linguistic conditions that determine the emergence of these patterns. Results reveal that, in terms of narrative structure, the orientation-complication-resolution stages pattern show to be prevalent. In turn, the analysis of the narrative samples also reveals that the abstract, evaluation and coda stages are not present. It is plausible that external non-linguistic factors may influence this phenomenon.

Since these narratives were elicited through the administration of a standardized proficiency examination to measure L2 oral narrative

competence, performance may be determined and conditioned by exam-related factors. First, the absence of the *abstract* stage, understood as the gist of the story, seems to be determined by the fact that this is summarised in the questions stated by the external examiner. Therefore, from a semantic point of view, the abstract is indirectly stated in the question and the EFL learners tend to make an assumption about this fact.

An additional effect on the structure of the narratives determined by the semantic composition of the task itself is the systematic absence of the *evaluation* stage, defined as the point of the story or why the story is told. Since the point of the story is stated in the topical design of the narrative task itself (spontaneity), the *evaluation* stage becomes irrelevant in the context of L2 oral narratives. Another exam-like factor that determines the structural configuration of the sample narratives is the time restriction. In this respect, results reveal that the systematic absence of the *coda* stage seems to be determined by the limited amount of time allocated to task completion.

Conclusion

The overall emergent picture drawn in this descriptive study suggests that EFL learners can complete L2 oral narratives in the context of a standardised test, producing a level of language which is significantly lower than the language level determined through the administration of a standardized proficiency examination to measure L2 linguistic competence (QPT).

However, the analysis of results suggests that the nature of the tasks presented in standardised exams and the administration conditions may have a negative impact on EFL learners' narrative performance, likely to affect the organisation of narrative discourse and the access to advanced (C1) linguistic resources in a wide syntactic and lexical range when producing L2 oral narratives. L2 oral proficiency decreases in oral production tasks, leading to a lower level of performance characterised by the presence of simplified discourse.

This divergence between linguistic and narrative competence revealed by the performance of participants in the completion of narrative tasks seems to be conditioned by factors that are not related to

inconsistencies in the levels of linguistic and communicative competence of EFL learners, but because of the artificial nature of the elicitation tasks and the conceptualisation of language proficiency determined by the data collected by means of the administration of standardised examinations.

Apart from being able to produce coherent narrations with ease, fluency, accuracy, and also exhibiting good control of a variety of narrative strategies through the use of syntactic and lexical devices and intonational features, the construct of advanced proficiency is characterised as situated language use in context, highlighting sociocultural and sociolinguistic considerations of appropriateness. For the assessment of narrative competence, it appears that there is more influence of pragmatic than linguistic considerations on the level of proficiency of L2 learners when performing narrative tasks in a controlled setting by means of the administration of standardised exams.

Thus, the criteria used to assess narrative competence in these formal assessment contexts should take into account pragmatic issues through the systematic adaptation of the evaluative dimensions in order to make them coherent with the features of the formal instructional framework in which advanced competences are developed. Here, more detailed research is needed to account for the differential evaluative criteria to be used when evaluating the development of narrative competence in context and also the conditions in which this evaluation should take place. In order to provide a genre-specific stimulant to enhanced L2 oral narrative production, L2 oral narrative assessment procedures should consider relevant pragmatic issues, like the purpose of L2 narrative production, the dialogic nature oral narratives, and the reconfiguration of narrative tasks as co-operative communicative instance.

What should be made of the finding that there is a level of divergence in terms of proficiency of EFL learners between the level of linguistic competence revealed through the administration of a standardised and the level of proficiency measured in the L2 oral narrative task? In this respect, results reveal that some concerns have arisen which call into question the validity of standardised assessment of L2 proficiency and the levels of coherence between the effects of instructional designs in formal settings in the development of advanced capacities like L2 narrative.

On the one hand, the assessment of narrative competence may need to take place under different conditions, considering the social nature of narrative production, its culturally-related nature and the fact that, by means of referring to personal experiences, language users become meaningful in a linguistic community and make sense of these experiences. In this sense, for valid and reliable assessment of advanced capacities, assessment conditions should eliminate the artificial conditions that lead EFL learners to perform at lower levels of proficiency in the context of standardised assessment. Consequently, L2 assessment institutions interested in assessing L2 oral narrative competence as an advanced L2 capacity, considering the mastery of syntactic forms, lexical range and discourse as global index of L2 proficiency, ought to invest efforts in devising study sampling strategies, as well as evaluative dimensions for establishing proficiency categories that take into account the social and dialogic functions and dimensions of narrative production in general and L2 narrative in particular.

On the other hand, as a concluding remark, the potential influence of curriculum designs and the internal and external characteristics of instructional settings are important to be considered not only because it may reveal an instructional bias in the particular undergraduate programmes, but also because it may shed light on specific aspects of the design of EFL programmes, in order to facilitate the longitudinal development of advanced capacities, like the production of L2 narratives. Namely, by providing second language instruction contexts with special designs for enhancing advanced capacities, these instructional settings are likely to prepare EFL learners who perform at generally lower levels of L2 proficiency, thus neutralising the divergence between linguistic and narrative competence.

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