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Article

What is Language Anyway? A View on Teaching English Proficiency in Higher Education

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Abstract
When training students at a tertiary level, we expect them to develop into expert users of language (Byrnes et al., 2006). This implies they are able to deal with linguistic problems of both a theoretical and a practical nature (Martin, 2016). However, what is often missing in our teaching practices is a model of language that would offer them the tools to do so (Hasan, 1999; Martin, 2016). Traditionally, proficiency programmes seem primarily concerned with grammatical rules and vocabulary expansion (Macken-Horarik et al., 2015). This focus on decontextualized language downplays the primary goal of language: to communicate with another (Halliday, 2014; Hasan, 1999). In our English proficiency programme we have adopted a systemic functional model of language to inform the design of our courses (Halliday, 2014). As such, we focus on lexicogrammar from an ideational point of view offering a metalanguage to talk about language (i.e. grammatics rather than grammar rules (Halliday, 2002)) and we add to this an interpersonal approach to the instances of language use in writing and speaking classes. Students are taught to operationalize these two (ideational and interpersonal) exploiting textual resources. Together, these three components — ideational, interpersonal and textual choices — construe the variables of context of situation: field, tenor and mode respectively (Martin, 2016). Working with these variables, we maintain, gives students a solid theoretical foundation and understanding of the functioning of language, and allows them to effectively communicate a focused purpose in any genre relevant to our culture.

Keywords
Tertiary education, English proficiency, systemic functional linguistics

1 Introduction

Non-native students of English at a tertiary level are expected to gain a high level of expertise in

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English, often understood as advanced proficiency (Humphreys & Gribble, 2013; Byrnes et al., 2006). However, how to define such proficiency remains a tricky task for both linguists and practitioners (Murray, 2016; Hyltenstam, 2016; Humphreys & Gribble, 2013; Byrnes, 2013; Iyldyz, 2007). Broadly speaking, three main views on proficiency and competence may be distinguished: a formal, structural approach, championed by Chomsky; a cultural, communicative approach as the perspective introduced by Hymes or the theories developed pedagogically by Vygotsky and Cummins and further defined by Canale and Swain (1980); and a social, functional approach to proficiency, as accepted in systemic functional linguistics and its educational reflex. It will be clear that the last two have more affinity with one another, taking into account the context in which language 'happens' and the situatedness of interactants, than either one has with the formal, structural approach with its focus on an idealised language user. Nevertheless, the current state of the art has yet to clearly and unambiguously define and describe the concept of proficiency in general, and advanced proficiency in particular. Examples of rather generalising descriptions are Byrnes' (2009) definition as "the acquisition of language capacities that can be used in academic, institutional and professional contexts, as contrasted with primarily personal and social contexts" (p. 11). She adds to this that there are no agreed upon categories that can measure this language ability. One of the broader conceptualisations of advanced proficiency may be found in Murray (2016), who proposes a threefold conceptualisation of advanced language proficiency, interrelating general proficiency, academic literacy/ies, and professional communication skills, as such including Byrnes' (2009, p. 11) "personal and social contexts." Others, like Hyltenstam (2016, p. 3), approach the issue entirely from an assessment point of view. What stands out from a review of the relevant literature most clearly, however, is that what proficiency is, is "very much in the eye of the beholder" (Byrnes, 2009, p. 14).

Despite such fuzzy definitions of proficiency, several internationally recognised proficiency tests and benchmarks have been developed, such as the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (but see Leung, Lewkowicz, and Jenkins, 2016 for criticism of the validity and usefulness of these tests in contemporary academic settings). According to Humphreys & Gribble (2013, p. 85), students in English programmes across the globe are generally expected to perform at C1 CEFR level, equivalent to IELTS 7.0, which can be understood as the following can-do statements:

- Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning.
- Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions.
- Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes.
- Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices. (Council of Europe, 2020: online)

As Hulstijn (2007: 663) points out,

> [t]he CEFR not only provides scales of the mixed what and how well type (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 58-96) but also scales of a number of "linguistic competences" (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 108-118), such as vocabulary range, vocabulary control, grammatical accuracy, and phonological control.

To this have been added sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences (Council of Europe, 2018). However, the self-assessment rubric offered by the Council of Europe (2020) focuses most clearly on "understanding", "speaking", and "writing". This shows a skewing in favour of the practical side of learning a language; priority is given to application, to the practical use of language in a wide range of situations. Put differently, knowing and understanding the nature of the language learnt is downplayed while emphasis is put on using its grammar and vocabulary as a tool in producing and processing spoken

and written texts. This almost exclusive focus on practical proficiency ignores the rather more complex insights into language required and expected from students of English at tertiary level. The more measurable objectives of practical proficiency are often reflected in teaching practices and assessments, several of which are based on traditional or generative ideas of correctness and linguistic hygiene (Martin, 2016; Macken-Horarik et al., 2015; Byrnes, 2009; Matthiessen, 2009). However, considering the fact that educational programmes at a tertiary level often "do not have the instructional time necessary for advancedness to be realistically attainable" (Byrnes, 2013, p. 513), such a focus on practical proficiency is not warranted nor desirable.

Several researchers have found the development towards advanced levels of proficiency may well take over a decade for independent skills. Discussing writing specifically, Kellogg (2008) compares developing writing skills with other cognitively demanding tasks, such as chess or playing a musical instrument, and as such needing "more than two decades of maturation, instruction, and training" (p. 3) to reach high levels of proficiency. The same may be claimed for features of grammar, lexicon, and reading (Bartning, 2016; Bartning & Forsberg Lundell, 2018; Bardel, 2016; Bardel & Gudmundson, 2018; McMillon & Shaw, 2016; Murray, 2016). Therefore, it would seem that it is equally, if not more, important to develop theoretical knowledge and understanding of English in order to scaffold continued proficiency development on an individual basis. Matthiessen (2009) reminds us that "[l]earning about language, in turn, is part of becoming a more autonomous learner – quite probably, a lifelong learner of the language. The key principle is to empower the learner, and this includes a range of strategies, both computational and theoretical" (p. 35). Doing so would allow students to develop the ability to deal with linguistic problems of both a theoretical and a practical nature (Martin, 2016), further scaffolding their ability to move from instance to system, as Byrnes (2009) suggests for proficient language users.

Empowering the learner implies rethinking the objectives, assessment and teaching methods we adopt in proficiency programmes at a tertiary level to include both measurable objectives and scaffolding future individual understanding of the language under study in particular, and of language in general. Clearly defining the linguistic theory that is the foundation of proficiency teaching is crucial in this respect as it "will determine what is brought into focus in the processes of language teaching and learning, how these processes are staged in the curriculum, and what materials are used and developed to support them" (Matthiessen, 2009, p. 31). In section 2 we present the model of language that we have adopted in developing our proficiency programme, relating it to both theoretical insights and pedagogical perspectives. Once this has been clearly articulated, we outline how the model has been implemented in our proficiency programme as developed at Ghent University Belgium (section 3). Finally, in a concluding section we draw theory and practice together to answer our title question: what is language anyway?

2 A Model of Language

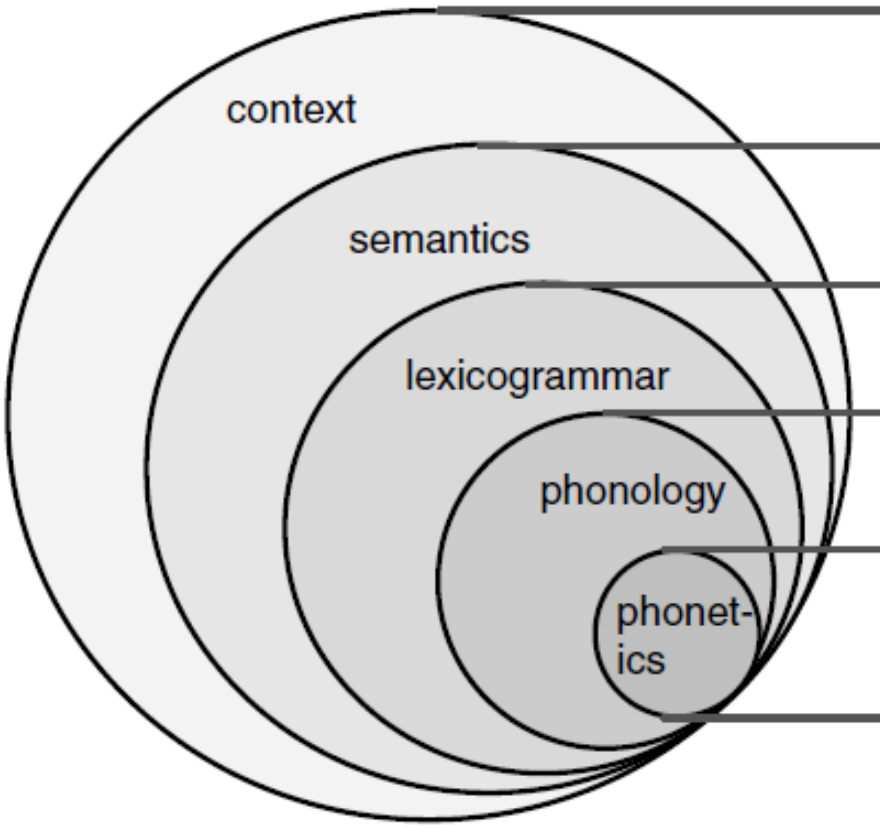
It seems clear that how one conceptualises language, whether consciously or subconsciously, is the foundation of how we approach teaching language (Matthiessen, 2009; Hulstijn, 2007; Leung, Lewkowicz, and Jenkins, 2016 on language testing suggest the same order of thought). In the following section we first present the linguistic theory and the model of language that is the foundation for the proficiency programme we have developed at Ghent University, Belgium. In a second step we relate this to Cummins' (1980) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP).

Within systemic functional linguistics (henceforth SFL), thinking about language means thinking about the functional orientation of a stratified social semiotic. In this perspective, language is seen as a meaning-making potential, construing the world around us (the ideational metafunction), enacting

the social relationships we enter into (the interpersonal metafunction), operationalising both in the texts we produce (the textual metafunction) (Halliday, 2014). This potential is stratified according to a set hierarchy, traditionally represented as the co-tangential circles of Figure 1, in which higher, more abstract levels are realized by patterns of lower levels. This principle of patterns-of-patterns is called metaredundancy (Martin, 2016; Taverniers, 2019). The two lowest levels — phonetics and phonology — can be understood as relating to the expression plane whereas lexicogrammar (including vocabulary on the one hand and grammar on the other) and semantics are seen as strata of the content plane. The most abstract level in this model is the level of context.

Figure 1

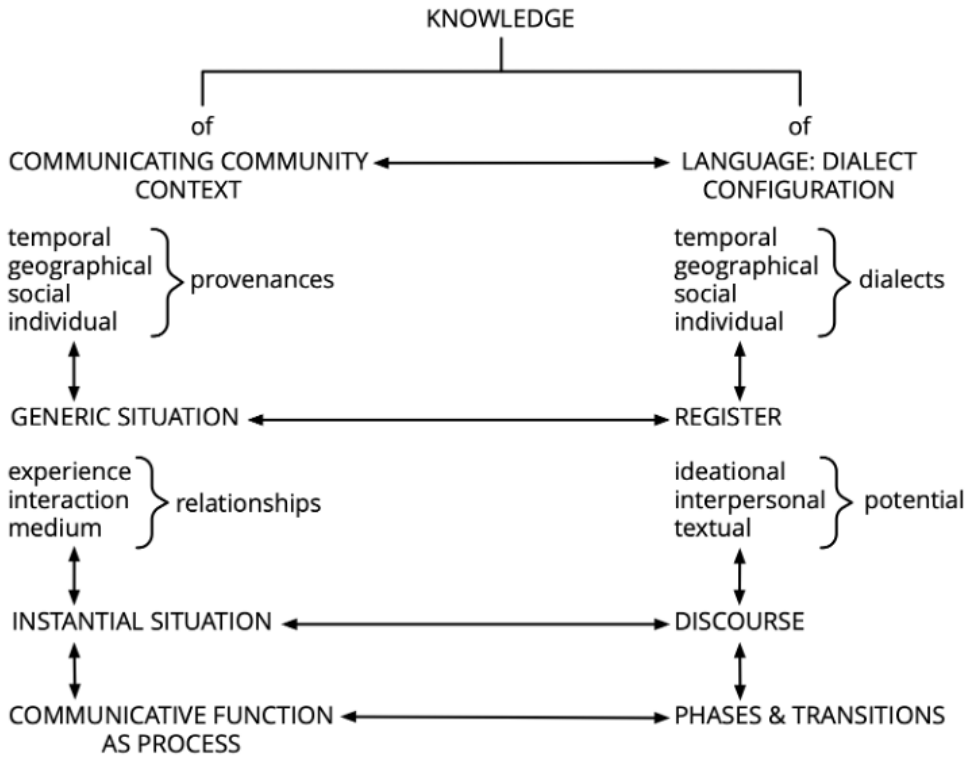
Stratified Model of Language within SFL (cf. Matthiessen, 2009, p, 37)



The idea of context was inherited into SFL from Malinowski, through the mediating step of Firth. Malinowski (1923, 1935) suggested the terms 'context of situation' and 'context of culture' to account for the way specific texts work within specific contexts and not in others. Context of situation refers to the immediate context in which an utterance is produced, whereas context of culture is the higher, more abstract level, formed by patterns of such contexts of situation and therefore closer to the potential pole of language. The debate about the role of context within SFL is by no means settled, as recent contributions to the discussion such as Christie (2017), Bartlett (2017) and Taverniers (2021) clearly illustrate. Nevertheless, we believe that the stratum of context is crucial in setting students on their way to becoming both expert users and expert knowers of language. Figure 2, reproduced from Michael Gregory (2002), introduces within the paradigm of SFL the notion of 'gnostology', referring to a knowledge of the communicating community context — or context of culture — on the one hand, and the language and its dialect configuration — or an instantiated context of situation — on the other. Proficient users, he maintains, are proficient in moving back and forth between these two levels of context and understand the correlations between the relationships at stake and the potentials activated within a specific context.

Figure 2

The Relationships Between Context Knowledge and Language Knowledge (reproduced from Gregory, 2002, p. 24)



Gregory (2002) explains the relationships in Figure 2 as follows:

> in the same way as a communicating community context is characterizable in terms of the generic situations potential within it, so too any configuration of temporal, geographical, social and individual dialect is characterizable by way of its available registers. A register itself is characterizable in terms of those ideational (field), interpersonal (tenor) and textual (mode) choices from the language's resources favoured by users in a particular generic situation; it is the linguistic reflection of a knowledge potential. (p. 23)

If we focus on the dynamics between register, discourse, instantial situation, and generic situation specifically (as we do in our proficiency programme), we can understand that choices in the metafunctional potentials give rise to a certain discourse — the sounds we make, the lines we draw. This particular discourse functions in a specific situation, which we call the instantial situation — the here and now. In this instantial situation, specific relationships are negotiated, with respect to experience (what are we talking about?), interaction (who are we in this interaction?) and medium (how are we communicating?). These potential relationships that may be activated constitute the generic situation, which is describable in terms of the potential associated with the variables of situation (field, tenor, and mode). These variables are, in turn, reflected linguistically as register potential. In this model, the left column corresponds to knowing and understanding extra-linguistic context while the right column corresponds to knowing and understanding linguistic strata. The arrows in the model are bidirectional, implying both sides are equally important in understanding how language works. Consequently, both columns need to be made explicit to learners of a language in order for them to attain advanced levels of proficiency as conceptualised by Byrnes (2009).

Theoretical and far removed from the classroom as this model may seem, it has found parallels in the pedagogical ideas of Cummins as early as 1980, in his distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP). We understand BICS to refer to practical proficiency that is characteristic of second language assessments such as CEFR, IELTS, and TOEFL. In Gregory's (2002) model, it most closely relates to language knowledge. This is typically achieved by teaching grammatical rules and expanding vocabulary in order to use these two areas of proficiency as tools in the production of text, spoken or written. The cognitive processes involved here are related to knowledge (memorising the rules), comprehension (memorising when the rules apply), and application (using the rules correctly). However, in order to achieve advanced proficiency, students need to be aware of the relationships in the context that are at stake as well. Introducing students to the cognitive processes involved with CALP may help them do that: analysis (taking the situation apart), synthesis (putting the situation back together again with novel understanding), and evaluation (checking whether this novel understanding is valid in new situations). Implementing these three processes in the language classroom can be achieved by focusing attention on semantic and functional meaning created in and through language as well as offering a metalanguage to reflect on language and grammar, or what is called grammatics (Halliday, 2002; and see below, section 3.3). As such, practice is separated from theory explicitly, providing "intellectual tools for reflecting systematically on language" (Williams, 2004, p. 263). Table 1 summarises our understanding of BICS/CALP.

Table 1

Summary of the Language Processes Involved in BICS and CALP and Their Associated Cognitive Domains

BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills)	
language processes	cognitive processes
vocabulary	knowledge
grammar	comprehension
pronunciation	application
CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency)	
language processes	cognitive processes
semantic meaning	analysis
functional meaning	synthesis
grammatics	evaluation

Bringing the two perspectives together, it becomes clear that the difference between BICS and CALP is one of level of context knowledge. CALP, as a deeper, more advanced level of proficiency, encompasses both context knowledge and language knowledge, understanding what relationships are at stake in a generic situation and what the linguistic reflex of these may be (Table 2) from a paradigmatic perspective as well as understanding the actual manifestations of these potentials in instantial discourse (Table 2).

By offering a combined approach — practice as well as theory — in our proficiency programme at Ghent University, Belgium, we believe we are able to sensitise students to the configuration of relationships in generic situations and how this resonates within the linguistic system of English.

Table 2
CALP as Understood from Gregory's (2002) Mode

CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency)		
context knowledge	language knowledge	manifestation
generic situation	register	discourse
relationships: • Experience • Interaction • Medium	potentials: • Ideational • Interpersonal • Textual	instances: • Field • Tenor • Mode

3 English Proficiency Programme at Ghent University, Belgium

In this section we describe the educational setting in which the programme was developed as well as the different components of our proficiency training and their relationship to the model of language sketched above, acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses.

3.1 Educational setting: Student population and the programme in general

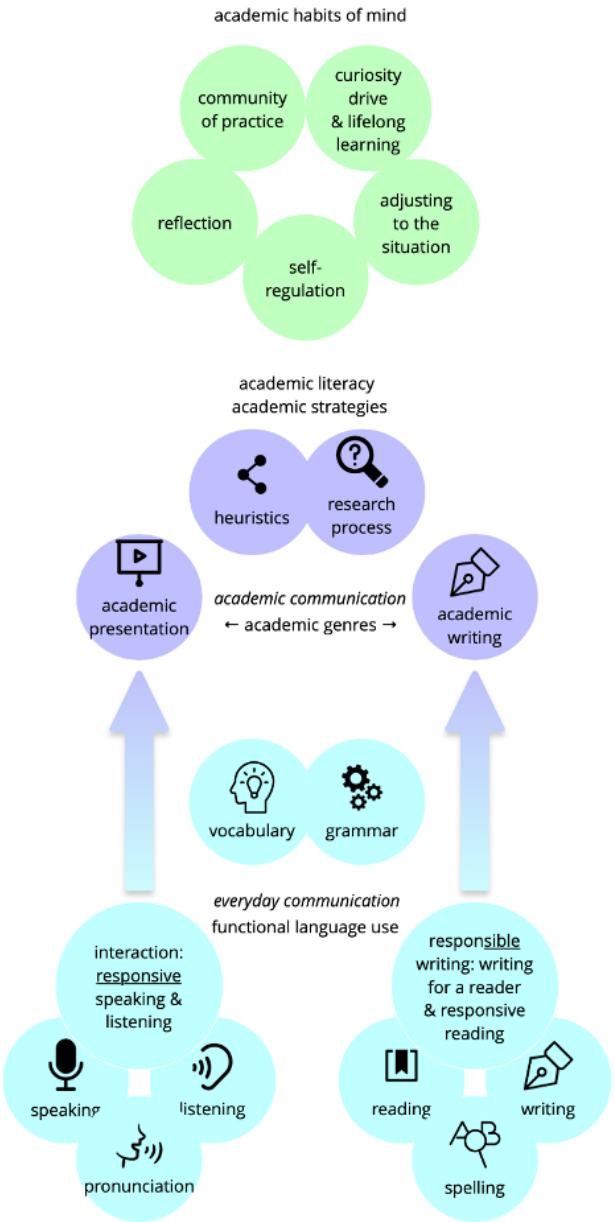
Ghent University is situated in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. Officially recognised languages in Belgium are Dutch (spoken in Flanders), French (spoken in Wallonia), and German (spoken in a small region in the east of the country). Due to federalisation of the government, the language communities within the country have developed differently in terms of language teaching (Goethals, 1997; Simon & Taverniers, 2011). In other words, the description of the student population in this section applies to students in Flanders only rather than in Belgium in general.

Although English is not used in any official way in Flanders and should therefore be seen as a foreign language, English appears less foreign in Flemish society than the officially recognised French does (De Wilde, Brysbaert & Eyckmans, 2020; Simon & Taverniers, 2011; Xu & Van de Poel, 2011; Goethals, 1997; Blommaert, 1996). Students who come into our university programme have generally been trained in English as a subject during minimally 2 hours a week for an average of 5 years (Goethals, 1997). As a result, they are already fairly proficient in using English in their everyday life (De Wilde, Brysbaert & Eyckmans, 2020; Simon, 2005). Furthermore, they enrol in a broader programme of linguistics and literature in which they choose two languages, in our case one of which is English. This means that the student's choice may be seen as deliberate and motivated positively for studying English as a linguistic phenomenon. However, these two characteristics, years of experience with English as a subject and a deliberate and motivated choice for studying English, carry with them certain risks, such as overestimation of own abilities. Several studies (Murray, 2016; Byrnes, 2013; Dunworth, 2013) as well as university-wide held student questionnaires have shown that students often feel they do not need or want additional proficiency training and sometimes miss the point of what such a proficiency within an academic setting may entail. Moreover, alongside not one but two proficiency programmes for each language they have chosen to study, students are also trained in linguistic and literary analysis of those languages and literatures. For at least a part of the student body attuning to the established cultures and the expectations inherent to each language programme may take some time and energy (Peeters & Fourie, 2016), which may lead them to neglect certain aspects of the training they feel they are already 'good at' compared to these new subjects, in turn leading to academic failure (Peeters & Fourie, 2016; Van de Poel & Van Dyk, 2015).

Taking into consideration these characteristics of the student population and the process of maturation to attain advanced levels of proficiency (Kellogg, 2008; Bartning, 2016; Bartning & Forsberg Lundell, 2018; Bardel, 2016; Bardel & Gudmundson, 2018; McMillon & Shaw, 2016; Murray, 2016; Byrnes, 2013) the proficiency programme at Ghent University is spread out over two full academic years. During these two years, students are introduced to (1) grammar and grammatics, (2) vocabulary learning, (3) speaker development, and (4) writer development via diverse teaching formats, ranging from traditional lectures to one-to-one consultations with either peers or teachers. Figure 3 summarises the programme, starting from below in the first year and moving up in the second year. The blue circles refer to teaching in the first year of our programme, the purple ones to the second year. Importantly, underlying all components and all teaching formats are what we dubbed 'habits of mind' (indicated by green circles in the figure). These are the cognitive processes and attitudes needed to achieve CALP in the longer term on an individual basis.

Figure 3

English Proficiency Programme at Ghent University, Belgium



3.2 Habits of mind

In her discussion of advanced proficiency, Byrnes (2013, p. 515) considers as vital the conscious creation of a level of meta-awareness, indeed putting it "at the heart of continuing development toward very advanced literacies". We understand this to be attitudes towards language and language learning rather than objectives that can be actively taught and measured in formal assessments. They are the overarching habits of mind we set for our students as much as for ourselves that go beyond pure language proficiency but are "intertwining components of academic participation" (Leung, Lewkowicz & Jenkins, 2016, p. 57). In the programme, five are identified:

1. reflective attitude,
2. community of practice,
3. adjusting to a given situation,
4. self-regulated learning, and
5. curiosity drive and lifelong learning.

A reflective attitude is encouraged in two ways. First, following certain activities, students are given reflective prompts to help guide their thoughts about their learning experience in that particular activity as well as about their improvement. Second, by actively practising the cognitive processes of CALP — analysis, synthesis, and evaluation — students are encouraged to take on board a reflective attitude towards not only the proficiency programme, but their university training in general. This reflective attitude is further enhanced through the notion of community of practice, emphasising the peer dimension of learning: learning in a university course is never an individualistic activity. Learning is participating in a group of peers who are committed to achieving the same goals and who share the same learning environment (tools, processes). One aspect of a community of practice approach to learning is the importance that is assigned to giving and receiving peer feedback, conceived of as a kind of reflective dialogue. The notion of community of practice has further developed into a mentoring programme as part of the writer development component: expert students mentor novice students in working on their development as writers. Closely related to this, is the principle of self-regulation. This refers to the ability to steer individual learning activities and approaches, to maintain motivation and focus, and to take initiative where needed. It includes responsibility and perseverance on the one hand (the ability to sustain attention, and often to inhibit impulses or overcome obstacles which may hinder learning; the ability to complete what is required), and flexibility on the other hand. This 'flexibility' dimension of self-regulated learning is intrinsically related to the fourth habit of mind, the capability to adjust to different contexts and requirements. It could be argued that this is the most vital 'habit of mind' as one that made us what we are, as humans, in a biological (evolutionary) and a social sense. More practically speaking, by offering varying and authentic instantial situations to students and by creating these situations with students, students are empowered to acknowledge the different demands different situations put on participants and language use. Finally, lifelong learning and curiosity drive refer to the willingness — indeed the eagerness — to always learn, to go beyond just completing what is required, and to seek and engage with opportunities to learn more, to understand something more deeply. We believe that, together, these five key habits of mind are the essence of learning and as such, they are the foundations upon which the proficiency programme is built. However, what is specific to our programme is that time is devoted to explaining these overarching aims, contextualising them within the proficiency programme, and that educators actively and recurrently refer to them throughout the two years of the programme. It is this investment in personal development more than anything else, we believe, that makes the programme a successful enterprise for committed students. In the following section the different components of the programme and their metafunctional orientation are presented.

3.3 The metafunctional perspectives in the programme

Taking together the limited time any proficiency programme has, the fairly high level of proficiency the students in our programme already possess, and the fact that teaching grammatical rules and how to apply them may not suffice in scaffolding students towards advanced levels of proficiency (Byrnes, 2013, 2009), the programme devotes considerable time in the first year to grammatics (Halliday, 2002). Grammatics can be understood as "the theory we draw on as we reflect on [grammar] … a grammatically informed metalanguage for reflecting on grammar" (Macken-Horarik et al., 2015, p. 146). As such, alongside teaching the syntagm of English from a descriptive point of view, the syntagm is also placed within the larger system, the paradigm, of English. This, we believe, allows the student to develop both expert usage and expert knowledge of English. A brief example for the system of modality will suffice to illustrate the principle. Rather than listing the possible uses of must vs should vs have to, these modal verbs are put on a cline of deontic modality (see Arús Hita, 2008 for a similar teaching practice). Referring to the cognitive processes involved in CALP (and the habits of mind inherent to them), students learn to analyse a fragment of text (what modal meaning is appropriate here? – for instance, 'internal obligation'), synthesise the context (select the appropriate verb – for instance, must in the case of a speaker expressing their own sense of obligation for themselves), and evaluate the outcome (compared to other possibilities, does the text mean what I want it to mean? – for instance: compare the different modals in I can't join you now, I {must / should/ have to} finish my homework first). As Matthiessen (2009, p. 42) puts it: "learners 'distil' their own personal meaning potentials out of acts of meaning in text by moving up the cline, and they test this changing meaning potential in the instantiation of new acts of meaning, confirming or revising it." By actively engaging students in the metalanguage of grammatics, we maintain they are better able to understand the underlying potential of any given instantial situation and generalise from that to any given generic situation. Following Halliday (2002), grammar is given a central role in the first year of our programme, spread out across the academic year, considering that "[l]anguage is powered by grammatical energy" (Halliday, 2002, p. 387). For students to mature into advanced levels of proficiency, this deep understanding of the paradigm of English is crucial.

However, grammar and grammatics cannot operate in isolation. Meaning is only created when there is an interactant to exchange it with. As such, the ideational, construing aspect of grammar and grammatics teaching is only one half of the story, with the interpersonal, enacting aspect of the speaker and writer components complementing the programme. These components focus more explicitly on the context knowledge required for advanced levels of proficiency: what are the relationships at stake in any given instantial situation? This is part of the reason why these components are not labeled as verbal processes (speaking and writing development) but as participant processes (speaker and writer development). Before any meaningful teaching can be done, students need to become aware of the roles they are playing and expect their interlocutors to play in a given situation. They are encouraged to accept the title of "speaker" and "writer", taking into account the needs of their interlocutors. In the writer development component, students are supported in creating instantial situations which can then be analysed, synthesised, and evaluated with respect to the relationships at stake in that particular situation through their linguistic manifestations. Through cumulatively complex assignments — free scribing, story, and essay — students are offered guiding writing principles such as flow and focus while considering the different needs readers of these types of text may have. A system of peer feedback, explicitly implementing a community of practice, is also implemented to help students to become responsive readers, picking up on signals as well as pointing out weaknesses in texts to their peers. From these instantial situations we encourage them to reflect and to grow towards understanding that different genres have different relationships at stake and that, as a result, their linguistic manifestations may be different as well. The main goal, in other words, is to give students the tools to develop into good interactants, that is, responsible writers and readers that can adapt to different situations. For an in-depth discussion of the methodology of the writer development component and its focus on establishing

and maintaining relationships, we refer to Haas (2018). This is carried further in the second year, where students develop the skills necessary to master one particular genre, the academic research report. Here, too, the focus is not solely on the product, but also on the process, incorporating heuristics and research skills to allow for a deeper understanding of why certain linguistic reflexes are appropriate (e.g., hedging) and others are not (e.g., bold statements).

In the speaker development component students are also supported in creating instantial situations which can then be analysed, synthesised, and evaluated with respect to the relationships at stake in that particular situation. Important in this respect is that students not only become good speakers, but also good listeners who are responsive to what is going on in the conversation. As such we aim to give them the tools to develop from this specific, instantial situation to generic situations. The main goal, in other words, is to give students the tools to develop into good interactants, that is, responsive listeners and speakers that can adapt to different situations. In the second year, this, too, is carried further into the realm of academic presentations. Importantly, this brings into focus the different demands medium puts on language. While the end product of the writer development component in the second year is a research report, the end products of the speaker development component in the second year are an academic poster on the one hand and an academic presentation on the other. Both differ from the written product in important ways linguistically, but they are different from each other as well in the relationship between the visual and the auditory channel exploited. While in the first year, the two components and the medium in which they take place seem unrelated, in the second year the textual, operationalising aspect of language is brought to the fore much more.

The reader will have noticed that, although vocabulary is present in the general outline of the programme, this aspect of proficiency has not been mentioned explicitly yet. However, it is in this component that the habits of mind are encouraged and developed most visibly. The programme does not offer explicit teaching of vocabulary, but instead requires students to pursue life-long learning from a place of curiosity, within a community of practice, through self-regulation. Practically speaking, that means we give students the tools to learn about words in the form of word lists (compiled by educators as well as by students themselves), discover how they best acquire new vocabulary (by introducing them to several techniques, both online and offline), to be curious about newly acquired lexemes (what do they mean, how can I use them, where do they come from, …) and, finally, use them appropriately within the other three components, but we do not set apart teaching time devoted to vocabulary only.

3.4 Limitations of the programme

Despite its strong foundation in linguistic theory and despite its thorough pedagogical translation, the programme suffers from several limitations. The most important of these is time. Although extended over two full academic years, it is not possible to introduce students to more than one specific genre — the genre of academic writing and speaking in this case. We firmly believe that treating other genres in the same in-depth way as the programme treats academic writing and speaking would increase the students' ability to go from instantial situation to generic situation and back again much more fluently. However, devoting less time to the academic genre would jeopardise the purpose of the programme in general. Furthermore, considering the context in which the programme is developed, the academic genre is the genre that students will encounter most often, both passively and actively, in their academic career at university. These rather basic, logistic reasons are the main motivations to limit the scope of the programme to just one genre treated in-depth.

Secondly, as research has shown (Kellogg, 2008; Bartning, 2016; Bartning & Forsberg Lundell, 2018; Bardel, 2016; Bardel & Gudmundson, 2018; McMillon & Shaw, 2016; Murray, 2016; Byrnes, 2013), developing truly advanced levels of proficiency takes much more time that the two years we have the students in our programme. As a result, one must settle for scaffolding students without truly knowing

what kind of language learners they eventually become. Nevertheless, anecdotal positive feedback from both local and international students later in their studies or even after university life supports us in continuing to develop the programme in such a way that students do in fact start developing and nurturing the habits of mind we set as ultimate aims for the proficiency training at Ghent University, Belgium. As mentioned before, we believe these are indeed the essence of learning in general, and language in particular.

Thirdly, although clearly founded on the three metafunctions postulated in SFL, the textual metafunction is not treated in the same way as the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions are. Again, time is a deciding factor in determining priorities, but we believe that students would benefit more from more explicit attention to the demands of the mode in which we interact on the language we can use.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we have outlined our ideas about English proficiency teaching at university level. In the introduction we stated that both theorists and practitioners struggle with the concept of proficiency in general, and advanced proficiency in particular. To circumvent the issue, many pedagogical practices — teaching and assessment alike — seem confined to practical proficiency, focusing on basic interpersonal communicative skills (in the sense of Cummins) such as vocabulary expansion and grammatical accuracy. However, doing so denies the importance of developing theoretical knowledge and understanding of English, needed to scaffold continued proficiency development on an individual basis. We have shown that proficiency programmes benefit from a clear foundation in linguistic theory. Our own programme is based on systemic functional linguistics and as such is oriented towards the three metafunctions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Furthermore, we have incorporated insights from the communication linguistics strand of SFL and its gnostological theory to account for the way context plays a role in language production.

This brings us to the title question of this paper: what is language anyway? And related to that: what does it mean to be proficient in a language? Within systemic functional linguistics, it is commonly accepted to define language as a stratified social semiotic. How far up those strata go, however, has not been settled (Taverniers, 2021; Christie, 2017; Martin, 2016; Matthiessen, 2015). Halliday himself maintains that a linguistic theory can go no further than what is in fact manifestly present in language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999). On the other side of the scale, we find linguists who maintain everything is meaning and who extend the basic co-tangential circles upwards to include ideologies (e.g., Martin, 2006). Venturing far into this theoretical debate is beyond the scope of this paper. However, based on the fruitful incorporation of context knowledge and gnostological principles into our proficiency programme, we feel obliged to change the question from "should context be considered part of language" to "to what extent is it a part of language?" It seems clear to us that the input from educational practices can once again support the further development of SFL as a linguistic theory (Martin, 2016).

Turning to the educational practice, what can we say about proficiency in general, and advanced proficiency in particular? If we accept that expert users of a language should also be expert knowers of that language, advanced levels of proficiency imply an understanding of what contextual relationships are at stake in any given situation (context strata) and what their linguistic reflex in the meaning potential (language strata) may be, as well as understanding that different choices in the potential can influence these relationships in turn (bidirectional influence). This means that our job as educators is to take both sides of that coin into consideration, offering students practical answers to practical questions (what am I supposed to do in this situation?) as well as theoretical understanding of theoretical issues (what does this situation mean and how does my language work within this, and indeed, in any situation?). This allows students to become expert users and expert knowers of English by developing the ability to move back

and forth between instantial situations and generic situations, between instance and potential, between what is and what may be.

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