On a (re)definition of oral language proficiency for EFL teachers: Perspectives and contributions from current research

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Abstract

This paper deals with the issue of oral language proficiency of non-native English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers (OLP-EFLT). It presents a theoretical review and findings from a large ongoing investigation that aims at defining the language domains, the levels of language analysis and the objective criteria to assess OLP-EFLT in such domain and within such levels of language. A (re)definition of OLP-EFLT has been a claim among a number of scholars involved in FL teacher development and researchers in the areas of language assessment. Thus the issue seems to require an investigation which includes the participation of teachers and graduating student-teachers in countries such as Brazil, where a large number of non-native EFL teachers work. I discuss how the concepts of oral competence and proficiency relate to data collected in contexts of English Language and Literature undergraduate courses in Brazil (Letters courses) so as to advance the articulation of conceptual knowledge and existing views of OLP-EFLT in the professional field. The data analysis compares the characteristics of an 'idealized' competence and that

which is realistically attained by students who graduate from Letters courses. The discussion also focuses on the experience of learning EFL at university and its contributions for OLP-EFLT.

1. Introduction

Expectations, beliefs and views about the oral language proficiency (OLP) of language teachers, especially of non-native language teachers and more extensively with reference to contexts of EFL, have been dealt with in a number of articles and studies in the areas of foreign language learning and teaching, language testing and teacher education (Andrews; 2001; Baghin-Spinelli, 2002; Barcelos, 1999; Elder, 1993, 2001; Fortkamp & Massarollo, 2002; Freitas, 2003; Rajagopalan, 1997; Rosa, 2003; Silva, 2000b; Viete, 1998). These authors, as well as the interest on teachers' OLP by teacher educators (e.g. Almeida Filho *et al*, 2001; Martins, 2003; Silva, 2000a) in the past few years, have indicated that a (re)definition of the OLP required for EFL teachers (OLP-EFLT) is necessary, given the significant number of non-native teachers who work, for example, in Brazilian schooling contexts.

This paper builds upon those claims and deals with the issue of OLP-EFLT and some connections between language proficiency and student-teachers' (future) pedagogical and professional performance. To achieve a proper definition of the OLP required for EFL teachers, I will first present a brief theoretical review of key concepts such as competence, fluency and proficiency, and then report on some findings from a larger ongoing investigation that aims at defining the language domains, the language levels to be considered and the criteria to assess OLP-EFLT in such domains and within such levels of language.

2. A rationale on FL teachers' OLP

While some authors touch the issue of OLP of foreign language teachers more like an existing 'problem' or report it as one of the variables to be considered among the various aspects involved in teacher education, others have successfully conducted studies centred

on this topic. Such studies have contributed for the understanding of the contexts in which it is not simply a 'problem' to be taken into consideration but a relevant issue among teachers and students completing undergraduate courses in English Language and Literature (henceforth Letters courses) in countries such as Brazil.

Baghin-Spinelli (2002) collected data among students of Teaching Practice courses (usually taken in the last year of the course program for a degree in Letters) and they reveal the strong influence of imaginary representations and idealized views of oral proficiency among student-teachers based on the standards of the 'native speaker' in ELT. She reports on the problematic 'relationship' those students have with the English language, its cultural aspects and native speakers, and the issue of their linguistic-communicative competence, and says:

> *"One […] difficulty connected to the myths shared by FL learners: the belief that it is possible to have control over the whole of a language, that is, the illusion that, when all the grammar and vocabulary are known, production […] will occur as a natural consequence." (p.45)*

She also states that

> *the Letters courses and the [course of] English Teaching Practice, in those courses, represent, for many students, after such a 'long path',[1] the expectation to be able to produce discourse in the foreign language. A wish which does not always come true …" (p.49)*

Not only are students' views and beliefs taken into consideration here but also the fact that the oral performance of non-native EFL teachers may be considerably deviant from acceptable standards of OLP in English (as detected by Silva, 2000b). The occurrence of errors in speech is acceptable from the perspective of interlanguage development (Corder, 1976) for EFL learners, as in the case of

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[1] The term 'long path' refers to the large numbers of years studying English in secondary schools in Brazil (around eight years), and then at university.

student-teachers, and may also be an occasional feature of speech produced by competent speakers. However, if a language teacher's speech is frequently marked by errors, this can seriously interfere with the quality of input provided for his or her students, as previously stated by Consolo (1996).

Silva (2000b) contributes for a review of what 'fluency' means as a descriptor of OLP for a non-native speaker of English. Fluency, as a component of OLP, stands in a large scope of linguistic aspects involved in spoken language (Lennon, 1990) and yet it is also interpreted as a synonym for the overall competence in speaking skills required or 'desirable' for EFL teachers.

Elder (2001) takes up issues identified by Douglas (2000) and discusses the problem of assessing teachers' language as a type of LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) by presenting the complexity of language skills required of teachers, which

> *"encompass everything that 'normal' language users might be expected to be able to do in the context of both formal and informal communication as well as a range of specialist skills." (p.152)*

She proceeds by saying that "specialist language skills" for language teachers "include command of subject specific/metalinguistic terminology" and "the discourse competence required for effective classroom delivery of subject content" (*ibid*) which is in turn dependent on linguistic competence. Elder (2001) suggests that one operational solution to deal with the "multidimensional" aspects of teacher [language] proficiency "would be to separate the purely linguistic and the more classroom-specific aspects of performance" (p.163) and leaves the ground of assessing LSP and its implications for defining OLP-EFL open for further research.

In addition, the relevance of this discussion finds support in recently revised policies in the Ministry of Education in Brazil that show an interest in assessing language teachers and graduating students by means of the National System for Certification and In-Service Teacher Development. The act of legislation 1.403 (09 June 2003), which establishes a departure point for further measures to be taken, determines the creation of a National Examination for Teacher Certification in several school subjects, including foreign languages

(*D.O.U.*, 10 June 2003). The guidelines stated in the document recommend that (a) the knowledge, competences and abilities that constitute the construct on which to base assessment tools are to be articulated and revised in a way that such a process guarantees the participation of the national community (Act of legislation 1.403, single paragraph), and (b) that such a process be grounded in scientific research, in which Brazilian universities shall be involved (Article 5).

The theoretical background and data on which I draw in the next three sections were provided by studies conducted in the scope of a research project called The Linguistic-Communicative (In)Competence of Letters Students – Foreign Language: construct and tendencies in Teacher Education, henceforth PROJECT, carried out under my coordination and sponsored by one of the Brazilian federal scientific organizations, the CNPq (*Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico*).[2] A group of researchers, teachers, and graduate and undergraduate students participated in the PROJECT (Consolo, 2001).
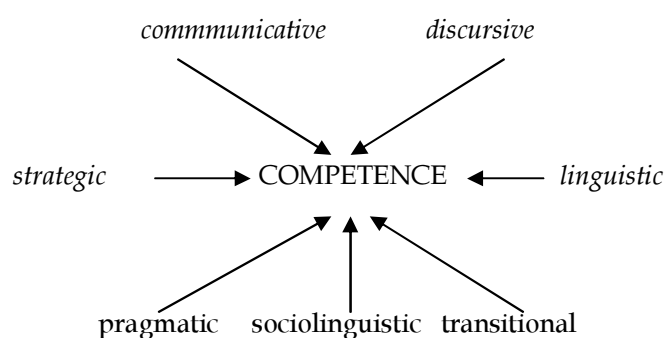
The PROJECT aimed at discussing how the concepts of oral competence and proficiency, based on the literature and data collected in contexts of EFL teacher education, can be articulated for the establishment of a definition of a linguistic-communicative competence in spoken English that meets, as closely as possible, the professional needs of those teachers. One step towards the establishment of desirable standards seems to be a comparison between the characteristics of an "idealized" competence, as sometimes revealed in the expectations raised by (some) specialists and rating scales from language tests, and that which is realistically attained by (the majority of) students who graduate from Letters courses in Brazil. The PROJECT also provides data on the experience of learning EFL at university, with focus on oral competence, and regarding students' (i.e., EFL teachers-to-be) expectations.

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[2] Process 520272/99-4 (NV). Further research on the issue of EFL teachers' OLP was conducted in the scope of my post-doctoral work at the University of Melbourne, Australia and sponsored by FAPESP (process 03/03981-0).

3. Background on language competence and proficiency

One of the aims of this discussion is to provide theoretical background and evidence to characterize the OLP-EFLT instead of the label 'linguistic-communicative competence' used in the PROJECT initially. According to Llurda (2000), various adjectives can be associated with the term 'competence', and I present the following diagram (Fig. 1) to illustrate these associations:

Figure 1   Aspects of language competence

commmunicative   *discursive*

strategic ⟶ COMPETENCE ⟵ *linguistic*

pragmatic   sociolinguistic   transitional

Llurda presents some definitions of communicative competence, of which the more relevant concepts for this paper are reported below. For Ellis (1994: 696), communicative competence is equivalent to "a language user's underlying knowledge of language" and "the knowledge that users of a language have internalized to enable them to understand and produce messages in the language". Edmonson (1981: 88) considers communicative competence

> *as being concerned with the encoding, decoding and sequencing of central communicative acts. This includes mastery of the linguistic code (phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon) together with the function (speech act) expressed. The use of this communicative competence depends on the individual's social competence.*

Edmonson's definition may be viewed as nearly equivalent as the constituents of communicative competence in Canale's (1983) framework, which considers four aspects: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences (see Consolo, 1999, for a more extensive review of these competences). Corder

(1976) brings about the notion of transitional competence, according to which a learner has some knowledge about a language and this knowledge is under permanent development.

For Stern (1983), proficiency means the actual performance of a learner in a given language, and it involves the mastery of (a) the forms, (b) the linguistic, cognitive, affective and sociocultural meanings of those forms, (c) the capacity to use the language with focus mainly on communication and minimum attention to form, and (d) the creativity in language use. Based on the definitions above and on Llurda's review, we may interpret communicative language ability (or communication by means of language use) as constituted of two components: *linguistic proficiency* and *communicative proficiency*.

Scaramucci (2000) adopts two senses of the concept with regards to terminology: a technical and a non-technical sense. The non-technical sense generally encompasses impressionistic judgements based on a holistic view and values a concept of proficiency which can be regarded as monolithic, stable and unique. This concept is usually pre-defined and represents a boundary that distinguishes, in overall terms, proficient and non-proficient learners. However, the author emphasizes that such a concept of proficiency is to be understood as dependent on other variables like the teaching context, its characteristics and objectives, which also makes it relative and variable as well. In its technical sense, the concept of language proficiency encompasses levels within which the descriptions of language ability and use fall in order to indicate what and under which circumstances a language user is able to do. In this sense, proficiency takes into account the real aims of using language in social contexts.

According to Scaramucci, the variety of concepts connected to language proficiency indicates some conflict and disagreement not only in terminology but also in the theoretical paradigms where such concepts have originated. This diversity, which may at first be interpreted as a consequence of different views of proficiency, is in fact a consequence of different views of language, or of "what it means to know a language" (p.16). Scaramucci argued that language should be better viewed as a complex system constituted by various aspects (for example, culture, discourse and structure) and not as the result of components that can be easily isolated for teaching or testing

purposes. Scaramucci suggests that what one means by language proficiency has to be defined in a given context of language teaching and learning. Hence, there is a need to take its configuration of social variables and educational aims into account.

In a similar way, Bachman and Savignon (1986) and Bachman (1988) criticized the view of proficiency as a "unitary language ability" since such a view was not supported by any theory or research. These criticisms are in line with Lantolf and Frawley's (1988: 10) words: "Proficiency is derived from policy and not from science or empirical inquiry." This argument helps towards a better understanding of the myriad of factors and the difficulty in defining OLP-EFLT. In her final considerations, Scaramucci discusses the distinction between the terms 'ability' which is related to processes of language use, and competence, which is related to a state or standard. And she recommends replacing the label 'communicative competence' for 'linguistic and communicative ability'. The concept of proficiency would then represent a process-like ability to use language competence, as well as a theoretical construct strictly dependent on the aims for language development and in accordance with the approach adopted in teaching and learning a language.

The views about proficiency reviewed so far match the definitions found in Taylor (1988) and Savignon (1983). According to Taylor,

> "*If we admit that competence in its restricted sense is still a useful concept (i.e., referring to some kind of 'knowledge' or, better, 'state of knowledge'), then we can draw a distinction between competence and proficiency, the latter term designating something like 'the ability to make use of competence'. Performance is then what is done when proficiency is put to use. Competence can be regarded as a static concept, having to do with structure, state, or form, whereas proficiency is essentially a dynamic concept, having to do with process and function. We can thus avoid the difficulties that arise from confusing these things.*" (p.166)

And in Savignon's words,

> "*Communicative competence is a 'dynamic' rather than a static concept. It depends on the negotiation of meaning between two or*

more persons who share to some degree the same symbolic system."
(p.8)

that is, language users who know the same language (the static sense of competence) can use this language (the dynamic sense of competence) and, as a result, show their proficiency in performance. However, I tend to agree more with Savignon's view of competence as dynamic rather than with Taylor's position about competence as a static concept. I see language as encompassing the dynamic forces that govern society and the changes society faces over time, as well as within and between discourse communities of language users.

4. Research design and methodology

Given the above discussion and my previous arguments (Consolo, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2002), the issue of how to define characteristics of linguistic competence in the scope of OLP for EFL teachers was investigated in the PROJECT with regards to the views and expectations of undergraduate students and teachers in Letters courses. Data were collected by means of questionnaires with open questions (as shown in Appendix A) that focused on slightly different aspects for freshmen and for graduating students, and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students recorded on audio (Appendix B) in six institutions (three private and three from the public system) in three states in Brazil (São Paulo-SP, Minas Gerais-MG and Rio de Janeiro-RJ, as listed below:

YEAR ONE (2001)

PUB1-FOR2001 = Public institution 1 (SP); graduating students (*FOR = formandos*);

PUB2-ING2001 = Public institution 2 (RJ); freshmen (*ING = ingressantes*);

PUB2-FOR2001 = Public institution 2 (RJ); graduating students;

PAR1-ING2001 = Private institution 1 (SP); freshmen;

PAR1-FOR2001 = Private institution 1 (SP); graduating students.

YEAR TWO (2002)

PUB1-ING2002 = Public institution 1 (SP); freshmen;

PUB1-FOR2002 = Public institution 1 (SP); graduating students;

PUB2-ING2002 = Public institution 2 (RJ); freshmen;

PUB2-FOR2002 = Public institution 2 (RJ); graduating students;

PUB3-ING2002 = Public institution 3 (MG); freshmen;

PAR1-ING2002 = Private institution 1 (SP); freshmen;

PAR1-FOR2002 = Private institution 1 (SP); graduating students;

PAR2-ING2002 = Private institution 2 (SP); freshmen;

PAR2-FOR2002 = Private institution 2 (SP); graduating students;

PAR3-ING2002 = Private institution 3 (SP); freshmen.

For each class, the questions for the interviews with students were prepared after an overall analysis of the questionnaires and aimed at clarification or development of answers given in writing. Data on teachers' views were collected so as to verify their perspectives of the teaching/learning processes of EFL at university, OLP-EFLT and to what extent their views would match their students'.

University teachers usually have control over assessment criteria for their classes. Thus the possibility of incorporating Letters students' views in the process of defining OLP-EFLT may expand the notion of language assessment, as stated by McNamara (2001):

> *"Learners too can engage in a process of deliberate sustained reflection on the quality of the products of their learning to date. [...] Learner self-assessment has the goal of making learners more reflective, more aware, more responsible and more independent."* *(p.345)*

He proceeds by saying that self-assessment means "encouraging learners to pay attention to their own performances and to develop ways of talking about them" and suggests research "on the way in which an emerging metalanguage about their own performance can be developed with learners" (*ibid.*). The contexts investigated and the states in the country were determined by the feasibility of having the

research assistants involved in the various phases of data collection. A large number of public and private institutions in the states of MG, RJ and SP offer Letters courses that can be seen as representative of the reality of equivalent courses offered in colleges and universities (private and public) throughout Brazil.

Besides the questionnaires and the interviews, another instrument initially proposed for data collecting in the PROJECT was an EFL test already available in the ELT market to assess the students' oral proficiency. Because the use of such a test was not actually feasible to test all the students involved under the conditions that governed the contexts investigated, the option was to design a test for research purposes, called *TEPOLI* (Test of Oral Proficiency in English),[3] which was initially piloted with graduating students at PUB1, PUB2 and PAR1 in year one and year two.

The test consists of an interview based on a set of pictures, some of which are accompanied by short texts, taken from EFL course books and magazines. In year one, a larger variety of pictures was piloted, ranging from materials and topics related to elementary/basic command of English, such as personal information and daily routines, to pictures which allowed for a conversation about more complex or abstract issues. In the process of analyzing the data obtained in year one, and for the purpose of developing a more reliable instrument, it was decided to give the test again in year two based on a set of six pictures chosen from the ones piloted the year before. All the interviews in year two were audio-recorded, as well as video-recorded at PUB1. Rating scales for levels A, B and C were written for the second trial of *TEPOLI*, based on the recorded data from year one, as shown in Appendix C. Each student would be given an impressionistic mark from ten to zero, as well as be placed in one of the three bands. Students whose oral performance did not meet the requirements in level C, that is, the minimum level of OLP expected from the graduating students by the university teachers who worked as raters and data analysts from *TEPOLI* in year one, would fail the test.

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[3] In Portuguese: *Teste de Proficiência Oral em Língua Inglesa*

The discussion that follows departs from the scope of students' views and expectations about OLP-EFLT and is then narrowed down to data on proficiency levels indicated by the marks for oral performance given to students in PUB1-2002 by means of the *TEPOLI*. It aims at answering the following research questions:

- To what extent do the students' self-evaluations of their OLP in English correlate with their marks in the *TEPOLI* and their overall performance in EFL in the last year of the Letters course?

- What do the data suggest about the characteristics of the OLP in English of students who graduate from Letters courses in Brazil?

5. OLP-EFLT: Data and discussion

Data on the characteristics of EFL teaching and learning in Letters courses, as well as on how student-teachers assess their oral competence and performance in English have been compiled and analyzed in research reports at the level of scientific initiation papers (for example, Guerreiro & Hatugai, 2002; Hatugai, 2003a, 2003b; Silva, 2003) and in-progress reports from MA projects (Dias, 2002; Pinto, 2002) within the scope of the PROJECT. Sets of categories for students' views and expectations about OLP-EFLT have been proposed by Hatugai (2003a) and Silva (2003). From the 45 categories presented by Silva's (2003)[4] on PUB1-FOR2002 and for the purpose of answering the research questions proposed here, I have selected to draw on the following six categories: 'self-evaluation of student speech', 'fluent speech', 'listening comprehension', 'vocabulary', 'self-evaluation of student's competence' and 'expectations to achieve good competence'. The examples, taken from the students' answers to the questionnaire, have been translated from Portuguese and labelled according to the respondents (for example, 'St10'). 'Self-evaluation of student speech' (Silva, 2003: 12-13) indicates a general view of oral competence as 'good' (five occurrences) and satisfactory engagement

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[4] Silva's (2003) analysis is based on the methodology recommended by Gillham (2000a,b).

in oral classroom interaction, as illustrated in Ex.1, from the answer given by student 10 to question 9, "As a student, do you express yourself in English in the classroom? How do you rate the quality of your oral expression?":

Example 1: St10

"Yes, I believe my participation in class is very good, for I ask questions, make comments, give examples, bring my everyday experience into the lessons. Then I believe I have a good level of oral expression in English."

'Fluent speech' (Silva, 2003: 17-18) reveals students' expectations about learning EFL before they entered university, especially in three occurrences, as in Ex. 2, from the answer given by student 10 to question 6, "What did you expect from the experience of learning English at university when you entered the Letters course? Have your expectations been met?":

Example 2: St10

"My wish was to speak English fluently. After I entered university not only did I develop oral fluency but also listening and reading comprehension." (St10/Q06)

On the other hand, some students pointed out they had difficulty to speak fluently (two occurrences), as illustrated in Ex. 3, from the answer given by student 4 to question 14, "What type of problems have you faced in your experience of learning English at university?":

Example 3: St4

"At first I had difficulty in learning by means of the communicative approach and in the process of oral communication because of inhibition and occasional lack of fluency."

As for 'listening comprehension' (Silva, 2003: 19), two occurrences show that students expected to develop their aural skills and three occurrences evaluate that they have achieved a desirable level of understanding of spoken English, as shown in Ex. 4 and Ex. 5:

Example 4: St7 – Question 6

"When I entered university I expected to speak the language fluently, improve my listening skills and learn a lot of grammar. As for listening and speaking skills my expectations have been met, for I can understand and communicate satisfactorily in English."

Example 5: St12 – Question 7[5]

"Yes, because I can communicate well [in English], read all kinds of text and understand what a native speaker of English says, and that's enough to make me able to teach [EFL]."

Students associate 'vocabulary' (Silva, 2003: 21) with their competence of using the lexicon in oral production. Despite the fact that they view their overall competence in spoken English as good, lack of vocabulary seems to interfere with their OLP, as illustrated in Ex. 6:

Example 6: St10 – Question 9

"Yes, I can express myself [in English]. My oral production is understandable and clear [but] I sometimes face problems in vocabulary or to use structures that are more adequate to express what I want to say."

Although the category 'self-evaluation of student's competence' somehow overlaps with 'self-evaluation of student speech', I maintain this distinct category as proposed by Silva (2003: 33-35) because it encompasses three concepts of levels of competence – 'good', 'reasonable' and 'upper-intermediate', and such assessment may provide some insights for the purpose of defining OLP-EFLT. Three occurrences indicate 'good competence' in spoken English, one occurrence indicates a 'relative good competence' and two occurrences refer to competence as 'reasonable'. It is within the scope of this category that there is more variation in the students' views,

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[5] "How do you rate your oral competence in English? Are you happy about this competence? Why?"

from satisfaction about their OLP to a combination of feelings of frustration and expectations for further language development. These data are in line with Baghin-Spinelli's (2002) report on students' expectations "to produce discourse in the foreign language" and "a wish which does not always come true". The following examples (Ex.7, Ex.8, Ex.9, Ex.10 and Ex.11), taken from answers to question 7, illustrate such views:

Example 7: St7

"I rate my competence as good because I can communicate [in English]. However, I intend to continue to study English for further development of my skills [in the language].

Example 8: St1

"I think my competence is reasonable but I'm not satisfied because I think I should have dedicated more [to the course] and perhaps I would need more time of contact with the language to improve [my competence]."

Example 9: St3

"I believe [my competence] is good. I'm not entirely satisfied about it [though], I think that considering the time I've spent on studying the [English] language I could speak it better than I can."

Example 10: St13

"[My competence is] Much better than before the university for [it was] here [that] I had the opportunity to reflect about some aspects of the [English] language and this was not possible in the [private] English course I did [before university]. Although there are still some aspects to be developed, I'm satisfied."

Example 11: St4

"Average, I can manage, but I know that it isn't what it should be like. No, because I realize that I have several problems [...] that I shouldn't have since I'm about to graduate as an EFL teacher."

One student placed himself at the upper-intermediate level and also indicated his wish for English language development (Ex.12):

Example 12 – St11

"I rate my level as upper-intermediate and I'm happy about it. But I want to improve even more."

Finally, I bring one more extract (Ex. 13) from the data analyzed by Silva (2003) within the category of 'expectations to achieve good competence' in order to contrast students' previous expectations about having 'full command' of the language, the reference to the native speaker and the belief that it is possible to achieve a 'satisfactory' level of OLP-EFLT in a Letters course:

Example 13: St11

"My expectations were to become a fluent speaker of the [English] language with full capacity to talk, read and write. Today I realize that those expectations were illusory and that even though my competence is not the same as that of a native speaker, it's satisfactory."

Silva states that

"The students' expectations refer mainly to the acquisition of a good level of competence which can improve after they leave university. They believe what counts is the ability to communicate fluently and the majority consider the development of other skills not as important as speaking. This ability to communicate fluently admits the occurrence of errors, since the most important point is to achieve communication in the foreign language." (p.48)

It is important to interpret Silva's statement on the fact that "the majority consider the development of other skills not as important as speaking" in the context of all the data collected for the PROJECT with other students and teachers in PUB1 and not only in relation to one class (FOR2002). And to consider the information from all the questionnaires, interviews and course marks, as well as understand that Silva's conclusion was based on her knowledge of the class and on an interview conducted with the class teacher. Conversely, students are aware of the importance of developing language skills in

all possible areas other than speaking. Nevertheless they valued the fact that "good" or "reasonable" levels of OLP in spoken English had been reached in their experience during the Letters course.

A preliminary analysis of these qualitative results, which corroborate with data collected with other classes in the scope of the PROJECT (Consolo, 2001; Guerreiro & Hatugai, 2002), indicates that the expectations of graduating students have not been entirely met, for many believed they would be 'fluent' in English when they finished the course. This is one of the reasons why it was necessary, in the course of the investigation, to change the term "expected competence" ("*competência almejada*"), as used in the text of the PROJECT (Consolo, 2001: 4), to 'idealized competence', which better defines generalized views on OLP-EFLT that seem to influence non-native teachers, students and other professionals in the area of English language teaching. This idealization of oral proficiency that influences EFL students and non-native teachers finds support in the studies carried out by Consolo (1996), about the controversies involved in the comparisons between native and non-native EFL teachers, and by Baghin-Spinelli (2002), about identity processes among student-teachers in Letters courses, as reviewed in section 2.

Fluency and OLP seems to be interpreted by the students in PUB1-FOR2002 as equivalent terms to refer to overall competence and performance, as earlier discussed by Silva (2000b). A benchmark to characterize competent speakers, as shown in examples 2 ("speak English fluently" and "oral fluency"), 3 ("lack of fluency"), 4 ("to speak the language fluently") and 13 ("a fluent speaker"). On the other hand, students in PUB1-2002 believe they reached a type of OLP that falls into levels that characterize a type of OLP that is either minimally expected at the end of the course, in order to understand spoken English and express yourself in oral interaction, or even higher levels, sometimes beyond their expectations. And they all seem to agree that they are ready to face some professional opportunities in ELT provided that they can continue to develop their language skills in EFL.

I turn now to the data obtained by means of the students' final course marks in English at the end of the Letters course, the marks they received by means of the TEPOLI and the levels of OLP, as

established by a preliminary version of the scale, at which they were placed. These are displayed in Table 1:

Table 1 PUB1-FOR2002: Levels of Oral Proficiency – TEPOLI and Course Marks

Students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
TEPOLI (levels)	B	C	A	B	A	A	B	B	C	B	A	A	A
TEPOLI (marks)	7.7	6.0	10.0	8.0	9.0	9.0	8.7	8.0	7.5	8.0	9.5	10.0	9.0
Course marks	6.4	5.2	8.5	7.7	8.8	7.6	8.6	7.0	7.4	8.3	8.9	8.9	8.0

Table 2 presents the distribution of course marks and *TEPOLI* marks in relation to the preliminary rating scale designed for the oral test and limited to levels A – C:

Table 2 PUB1-FOR2002: Levels of OLP and distribution of students

Levels of OLP	Number of Sts	% (Sts)	TEPOLI: range of marks [mean=8.5; median=8.7]	Course marks: range [mean=7.8; median=8.0]
A	6	46.1	10.0 – 9.0	8.9 – 7.6
B	5	38.5	8.7 – 7.7	8.6 – 6.4
C	2	15.4	7.5 – 6.0	7.4 – 5.2

The results in *TEPOLI* indicate levels of OLP within 10.0 and 7.7, that is, in bands A and B, for a large proportion of students (11 out of 13). These somehow equate with course marks for 38.5% of the class (five students at level B) but are generally higher for the majority of the class, at levels A and C. Such results are in line with Silva's (2003) report on "good" levels of oral competence and the fact that priority was given to the development of spoken English in (the last year of) the course.

The questionnaire and the questions asked in the interviews did not demand that the students base their assessment of OLP in more specific or technical aspects of spoken language and with regards to language specifications required for teaching EFL. Otherwise, their answers might have come closer to the descriptors in TEPOLI. This is why only general claims can be made here. Perhaps this is an issue

for further research in the area of language assessment – the metalanguage from the students' perspectives, as suggested by McNamara (2001).

The small scope of data presented here and the limitations imposed by the research instruments, including the TEPOLI, do not allow for strong or definite claims about the OLP-EFLT. Yet the different perspectives considered indicate optimism about the levels of OLP among the students investigated, in both listening and speaking skills, and some correlation between their self-assessment, the considerably high marks in the oral test (mean=8.5, median=8.7) and their overall assessment as EFL students at the end of a Letters course.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I depart from earlier claims about the OLP-EFLT and a theoretical review of some concepts in oral language assessment and proceed towards a presentation and discussion of findings from a larger investigation, the PROJECT, that aims at defining the domain, levels of language analysis and more objective criteria to assess OLP-EFLT.

The data discussed, from one context of EFL student-teachers graduating from a Letters course in Brazil, indicates that although the students' expectations for OLP were not entirely met, which is in line with findings from other similar contexts, there are reasons for optimism. Students in the context investigated seem to be ready to follow a career in ELT in Brazil provided that they can continue to develop their language skills in EFL after their graduation. I hope this discussion reflects not only the reality and some demands faced by (future) EFL teachers in Brazil, where improvements can be made, but also provides important contributions for EFL teachers and researchers elsewhere.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire answered by graduating students in PUB1-2002 (translated from Portuguese).

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR GRADUATING STUDENTS IN LETTERS COURSES

Dear student,

This questionnaire aims at collecting data for a research study on the process of learning foreign languages in Letters courses in Brazil. Your opinions will be analysed with discretion and names of participants will not be revealed. Please answer this questionnaire in class and ask for clarification in case of any doubts. Your contribution will be very important for the study.

Thank you very much.

1. Your age: ___ years - 2. Your native language: _____

3. Sex: ( ) F ( ) M

4. Did you have any knowledge of English before you started the Letters course?

( ) YES   ( ) NO

If "yes", how did you learn English before this course?

[Tick all the alternatives that apply to you.]

4.1   Fundamental School (1st to 8th grades ....( )

4.2   Middle School ....…...............( )

4.3   University(ies) ....…….........( )

4.4   Private language schools (PLSs) ....…….........( )

If you finished or interrupted your studies in PLSs, up to which level did you take the/these course(s)?

( ) basic   ( ) intermediate ( ) advanced

If you are studying at a PLS, which level are you in?

( ) basic   ( ) intermediate ( ) advanced

4.5   Private lessons ....( )

4.6   Other – please specify: ....

5. Do you have any contact with English outside EFL lessons in this university ? For example, family members or friends who speak English, reading, television, internet, etc. Please specify.

6. What did you expect from the experience of learning English at university when you entered the Letters course? Have your expectations been met?

7. How do you rate your oral competence in English? Are you happy about this competence? Why?

8. Which aspects of your EFL lessons at university have contributed for your competence in English, especially for listening and speaking skills?

9. As a student, do you express yourself in English in the classroom? How do you rate the quality of your oral expression?

10. Do you think your EFL lessons in the Letters course were satisfactory? Why (not)?

11. Do you speak English with your teachers? And with your classmates? (If you don't do it, why not?)

12. Do you believe EFL teachers in Brazil are expected to teach in English only? If "yes", what aspects can contribute for verbal interaction in English in the classroom?

13. Which of the activities carried out in your EFL lessons at university have most pleased you? Why?

14. What type of problems have you faced in your experience of learning English at university?

15. How do you expect to use English in the future? (teaching career, research, other)

16. Do you have any further comments or suggestions about the process of learning English in the Letters course?

[Adapted from Consolo, D.A., Guerreiro, G.M.S. & Hatugai, M.R. (2001).]

Appendix B: Sample of questions asked in interviews with graduating students (translated from Portuguese)

4. Is the English language course at university enough for you to develop a good oral competence in the language?
5. In your opinion, why didn't some of the students in your class reach a desired level of oral competence in English?
6. What level of oral competence is required for an EFL teacher?

Appendix C: Rating scales for *TEPOLI* in year two

Level A	• Uses all syntactic structures correctly and if the candidate makes syntactic mistakes s/he is able to correct himself/herself (self-correction); • Uses complex syntactic structures and a large variety of lexicon; • Pronunciation features are very similar to those produced by native speakers of English; • Communication and interactive goals are fully attained, and the candidate displays fluency and competence in a range of functions and topics.
Level B	• Uses simple and complex syntactic structures correctly most of the time but makes a few grammatical mistakes; • Uses less complex structures and does not use a large variety of lexicon; • Pronunciation is comprehensible but displays some deviation in comparison to patterns of native speakers of English; • Communication and oral interaction are achieved satisfactorily.
Level C ('pass mark')	• Uses simple syntactic structures most of the time and makes occasional grammatical mistakes; • Uses a limited range of lexicon and may lack vocabulary; • Pronunciation is comprehensible; • Communication and interactive goals are achieved within some limits; fluency (rate and flow of speech) is occasionally affected by interrupted speech and long pauses.