

Foreword

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**Language Proficiency in Native and Non-native Speakers:
Theory and research**

Jan H. Hulstijn

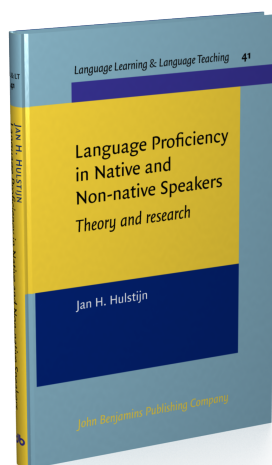
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Foreword

For many years I have been fascinated by the notion of language proficiency in its relation to fundamental issues in our understanding of first and second language acquisition and bilingualism. Over the years I have published several articles on this topic. In papers published in 2007 and 2011, I presented preliminary versions of the theory which, in this book, I call BLC-HLC Theory (also referred to as BLC Theory, for short). I claim that language proficiency can best be seen as consisting of Basic Language Cognition (BLC) and Higher Language Cognition (HLC). The time had come to put all related ideas and the related empirical research on paper, which required a book-length text.

Because I continue reading and thinking about language proficiency, because I still feel uncertain about many of my ideas and because I keep finding articles and books that should be mentioned in the book, I was and am hesitant to submit the text for publication. The main reason why I decided to seek publication, conquering my hesitations, is that I love academic discussion and dialogue. For a discussion to take place, one has to publically take a stance. This is what I do in the present book, hoping for discussion. If not all what I have written is grossly and ridiculously naïve, some of the contents of this book might lead to a genuinely academic dialogue, decreasing the ignorance of all participants and perhaps increasing our insight into the matters presented and discussed in this book.

This book is not a textbook. I don't have the talent, knowledge or patience for writing a comprehensive overview of the literature on language proficiency and related topics. This book is heavily biased in the sense that in my thinking and writing I was led by my personal views on and curiosity with the issues addressed. The chapters of this book therefore do not provide a neutral or balanced view. It is my bias that has led me to speak about some issues and some studies, and remain silent about other issues and studies. However, as I said, I have not finished thinking about the topics of this book and I hope to have an opportunity in the not too distant future to share with others how my theory and ideas will have developed – also resulting from the comments of critics.

The book consists of two parts. Part One (Chapters 1–5) is devoted to theory. I present my BLC-HLC theory in Chapters 3 to 5. The preceding Chapters 1 and 2 provide the scientific context in which the theory has to be seen. Part Two

(Chapters 6–10) is devoted to empirical research. Chapters 6 to 8 report on *selected* studies on language proficiency in native speakers (Chapter 6), in non-native speakers (Chapter 7), and on the relationship between literacy in a first and second language (Chapter 8). Where possible, I make evaluative comments of either a methodological or theoretical nature and formulate suggestions for future research. The final two chapters do not review any empirical literature. Instead, Chapter 9 discusses conceptual and methodological problems in measuring language proficiency in research on second language (L2) acquisition and bilingualism, while Chapter 10 critically examines the notion of levels of L2 proficiency, as rendered by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and similar proficiency scales; it also suggests ways of empirically investigating a number of questions that the CEFR raises but is not capable of answering.

Despite its title, this book is *not* about language proficiency assessment for educational purposes. I have long considered using the term “language cognition” instead of “language proficiency” in the title. In the end I deemed that the unwanted risk of people thinking that this is a book of psycholinguistics or cognitive neurolinguistics was worse than the unwanted risk of people thinking this is a book about language assessment and thus decided on “language proficiency”.

Small parts of this book have been published in the form of articles in journals. However, because I have continued thinking and reading about these topics, the book is not a collection of earlier papers. I have adapted them to reflect my current thinking and updated accounts of the literature. In footnotes to the title of the chapters concerned I specify how and to what extent the chapter is based on earlier papers.

I should add here that, in fact, there was an additional reason for writing a book-length treatise about language proficiency. With my research associates, I had the pleasure of working on a number of research projects, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The last grant that Rob Schoonen and I received, actually stipulated in its funding conditions that a monograph should be written summarizing our research. While our NWO-funded empirical studies have been completed and almost all their results have been published, the monograph was still to be written. The present book is more than a monograph and it appears a couple of years after the completion of our last project but I trust that NWO will be content with it. Chapters 6.6, 7.3 and 8.3 summarize and evaluate our projects, conducted over the last twenty years in Amsterdam.

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There are many people who have stimulated me in my work that led to the writing of this book. First of all, I owe a heartfelt thank you to all researchers with whom I collaborated in the projects referred to in the previous paragraph, in particular, in alphabetical order: Sible Andringa, Nivja de Jong, Rob Schoonen, and Amos van Gelderen. Rob Schoonen has been a principal investigator in almost all projects. The close collaboration with Rob, over a period of almost twenty years, has been extremely rewarding and stimulating, both academically and personally.

Many researchers from abroad have given feedback on my presentations and papers about BLC Theory. Some of them even read draft versions of all chapters of this book. This feedback, sometimes highly critical but always constructive, helped me overcome my hesitations in this book project. In particular, I would like to thank the following people, in alphabetical order: Charles Alderson (Lancaster University), Lyle Bachman (University of California at Los Angeles), Vivian Cook (Newcastle University), William Grabe (Northern Arizona University), Diane Larsen-Freeman (University of Michigan), Tim Mcnamara (University of Melbourne), and Lourdes Ortega (Georgetown University). I am also very grateful to Nina Spada (University of Toronto) and Nelleke van Deusen-Scholl (Yale University), series editors at John Benjamins Publishing Company, for their rigorous reading of the manuscript and their invaluable suggestions of many improvements in organization and language. Finally, Kees Vaes deserves a word of gratitude for his professional guidance, always offered quickly and friendly. All imperfections in this book are mine.