Book Reviews
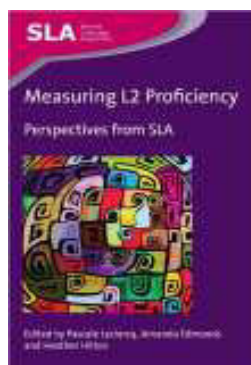
Measuring L2 Proficiency: Perspectives from SLA

Pascale Leclercq, Amanda Edmonds & Heather Hilton (Eds) (2014). *Second Language Acquisition,* 78.

Bristol: Multilingual Matters (229 pages).

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The book, *Measuring L2 Proficiency: Perspectives from SLA* gets its distinctive flavour from being written in the context of language learning in France within the Common European Reference Framework. This gives a bilingual flavour to the book that is quite different from the Anglo-centric perspectives found in most books on language acquisition and measurement of its proficiency. In addition, the flavour of French comes out through two articles—one deals with the acquisition of the French subjunctive and the other with elicited imitation in French as a test of listening.

The book opens with an overview of research on proficiency acquisition and refers to the contrastive linguistic approach of Lado and Fries. The approach to analysis is basically that of structuralism without any connection with the cultural and social functioning or issues of text, which is such a strong European issue, beginning with the Prague School. This chapter could have been enriched by taking into consideration the Chomskyan revolution and the works generated under SLA.

An issue such as bilingual dominance (which of the two languages known by an individual is more dominant) is not often brought into proficiency studies. It is more of a European rather than an Anglo concern in psycholinguistics. The Anglo concern stems from (what is considered) a primarily monolingual society, while this book has the bilingual perspective clearly in mind. The issue of language dominance also brings out the importance of the brain rather than the mind, which is the focus in the Chomskyan tradition. Again, issues of mother tongue interference and of the inter-translatability of languages have also been dealt with in this book.

The aim of the eleven articles in this volume is to arrive at an understanding of L2 proficiency and ways of measuring it. Within this, the focus is on oral proficiency more than written production, and we get useful ways of measuring it. To give an example, Heather Hilton uses errors, hesitation and retractions as measures of proficiency. The retractions are taken to be simple repetitions, reformulations (only one element of the repeated statement is changed), restarts (more than one element changed) and false starts (utterance abandoned). Another useful approach called elicited imitation is provided by Tracy-Ventura, McManus, Norris and Ortega. In this approach, participants are required to listen to an utterance and repeat it as accurately as possible. Another set of tests provided by Peter Prince fall under the term "comprehension restitution" in which the test requires the spoken input to be jotted down by the student to demonstrate understanding. This can be done in several ways, but what is suggested is a summary of a news bulletin in terms of presenting the gist of what has been said, and a dictogloss or reporting

the meaning in writing of what has been read aloud or spoken.

For each of these approaches, experimental studies have been reported and their results have been analysed and considered against the background of other such studies. The nature of listening comprehension has also been analysed. Prince talks of the linguistic, semantic and pragmatic processing of spoken input, of how bottom-up processing takes place during perceptual decoding, and top-down processing involves the learners making use of their knowledge of the world, the ongoing situation and even their knowledge of the language itself.

The nature of the beast—the listening comprehension construct—has also been analyzed in the studies dealing with listening; more particularly in the study by Zoghlami, who analyses test scores on two very different tests of listening, one which focuses on phonological decoding and the other which tests higher order abilities. The results of the two tests are quite different. Based on the findings, the authors conclude that what is being judged under the cover term of 'listening' is not the same phenomenon in the two tests considered. The study emphasizes the necessity of identifying the construct of the skill that is being tested before deciding on the use of a particular test.

The article on learner corpora for testing and assessing L2 proficiency by Callies, Dies-Bedmar and Zaytseva is interesting and useful. It shows how the corpora can be used to measure L2 written proficiency according to the widely accepted criteria of complexity, accuracy and fluency. They find that the use of corpora can help to make assessment more reliable, i.e. it can help to increase transparency, consistency and comparability in the test instrument and in the assessment that is meted out in subjective tests. In addition, such corpora can be used for reasons other than simply working out the parameters for assessment. They could help in

narrowing down the concept of proficiency for a particular purpose / a particular group of students. It is indeed useful to compile corpora from the written production of one's students, and use this for a variety of purposes- defining levels of proficiency, the process of acquisition, and ways of determining what to test. Compilation of corpora is not something we do commonly in India.

Two articles on language dominance for bilinguals and the nature of the bilingual memory provide another perspective which might be useful in multilingual situations. These articles throw light on the means by which we can assess relative proficiency in two languages and on the ways in which the memory records and yields knowledge of different aspects of language.

Finally, the book provides useful insights on the testing of aspects of proficiency, which can be implemented in our classrooms. It also provides examples of experiments which could be helpful in planning our own research projects.

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