# Measuring L2 Proficiency

## Perspectives from SLA

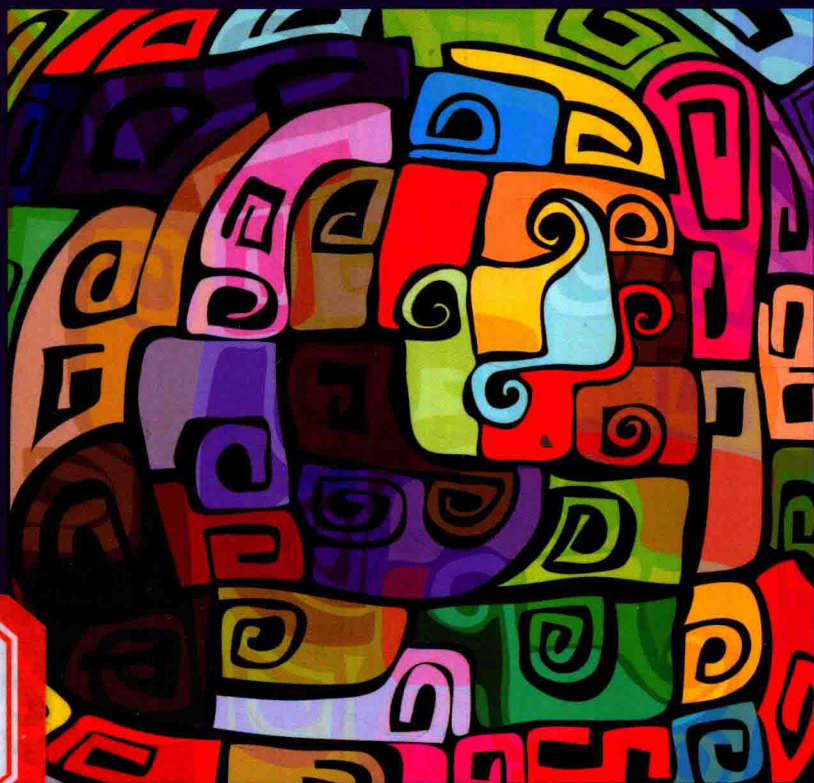Edited by Pascale Leclercq, Amanda Edmonds and Heather Hilton

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# Acknowledgments

# Preface

Language 'proficiency' is a concept that language teachers have been grappling with directly for the past 30 years: how can we help students improve their proficiency (both productive and receptive) in communicative or 'task-based' classrooms, and how can we 'measure' this type of improvement? During this same period, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have been interested in the emergence of proficiency in a second or foreign language (L2), its characteristics, and possible stages that language learners pass through on their way towards plurilingual competence. And, of course, the assessment of receptive and productive proficiency, both in the oral and written modes, is the bread and butter of the language testing industry, and lies at the heart of the *Common European Reference Framework for Languages*.

This book is an attempt to bring together concrete ideas on identifying and measuring L2 proficiency, from different branches of SLA research. The authors are not testing specialists, but researchers interested in different facets of foreign- and second-language (L2) proficiency, and most particularly in indicators of receptive or productive proficiency that are valid, reliable and easily implemented. We believe that this is the contribution of our volume – a renewal of interest in the criteria of reliability and feasibility in the assessment of L2 proficiency, both of which were sidelined in the performance-testing wave that swept in with the Communicative Approach. The authors of the *European Framework*, for example, declare quite openly that validity is the unique construct used to define the European language 'reference levels': '*Validity* is the concept with which the *Framework* is concerned' (Council of Europe, 2001: 177). Dismissing *reliability* as a mere 'technical term', the authors maintain (rather circuitously) that 'accuracy' of assessment decisions can only be determined by the 'validity of the criteria used' and of the procedures used to determine these criteria (Council of Europe, 2001: 177).

Certainly the *Framework*'s reference levels were painstakingly established (Council of Europe, 2001: 205–216), in an attempt to guarantee the accuracy/validity of the descriptors, but it has not been so easy for language teachers and language-teaching institutions to dismiss questions relating to the reliability and feasibility of implementing these performance-based descriptors. These questions have been addressed at numerous international conferences,

and various European projects have been set up in an attempt to improve the reliability of the 'Reference Level' scales or their implementation, including the WebCEF project (summarized in this volume by John Osborne), the SLATE project, CEFLING, as well as projects such as 'What is speaking proficiency?' (WISP, coordinated by the Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication at the Universiteit van Amsterdam).

It therefore seems timely to assemble investigations into L2 proficiency emanating from the various branches of SLA research: psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, corpus-based and applied linguistics. The chapters that follow are all concerned with indicators of productive or receptive proficiency in a second or foreign language that are precise and valid (often validated experimentally), but also practical to implement – and therefore useful. What can be measured, precisely and objectively, in L2 production and reception? What can one reliably propose in the form of self-assessment questionnaires? Which, among the reliable measures, best reflect overall proficiency? Are there subcomponents of proficiency that constitute particularly valid indicators of L2 level, and, if so, which of these can be easily measured? These chapters offer insights from the SLA research agenda that can also be useful to teachers, and may inspire new avenues of investigation for language-testing specialists.

*Heather Hilton*
November 2013

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# Introduction

# 1 How to Assess L2 Proficiency? An Overview of Proficiency Assessment Research

## Pascale Leclercq and Amanda Edmonds

This volume addresses an area of great interest to both language teachers and researchers interested in pedagogy and second language acquisition (SLA), namely how to assess *proficiency* in a second language (L2). For teachers, it is important to be able to assess accurately and reliably the L2 proficiency of their learners, whether for formative evaluation, summative evaluation or within the context of language certification. For researchers, valid proficiency assessment measures are crucial, as without them meaningful interpretation of research results remains elusive (Norris & Ortega, 2003: 717; Pallotti, 2009). In her thorough review of the assessment practices in more than 150 articles published in four major SLA journals, Thomas forcefully argues this point, concluding that 'there is evidence that L2 proficiency is sometimes inadequately assessed in current second language acquisition research. In certain cases, this compromises empirical claims; in many cases, it limits the generalizability of research results' (Thomas, 1994: 330). According to Thomas, and many others, it is important that proficiency assessment measures be *valid* (i.e. testing what they purport to test), *reliable* (i.e. providing trustworthy information) and *practical* (i.e. fitting the needs of their users in terms of ease of implementation). However, two decades after Thomas's call for a better control of the proficiency variable in the field of SLA, authors continue to highlight the difficulties associated with proficiency assessment. Hulstijn *et al.*, for example, point to the lack of reliable level assignment as a general problem in SLA research:

> SLA [...] has frequently simply taken groups of learners at supposedly different levels of ability, conducted cross-sectional research and claimed that the results show development. Yet the levels have been woefully undefined, often crudely labelled 'intermediate' or 'advanced', or 'first