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Jan H. Hulstijn, University of Amsterdam

BLC Theory in a nutshell

Purpose

The main purpose of *BLC Theory* (Hulstijn, 2015, chapters 3-5) is to serve the empirical study of some fundamental issues in the study of L1 acquisition, L2 acquisition, and bilingualism. These fundamental issues are concerned with (i) explaining individual differences in L1 proficiency, (ii) answering the question of whether there is an age-of-onset constraint on attaining a so-called 'native' control of an L2, (iii) explaining non-trivial individual differences in L2 acquisition, and (iv) making comparisons between L2ers (bilinguals) and L1ers (monolinguals). The best way to make these four issues empirical and to gain insight in them is to propose a model (theory, framework) of language proficiency, consisting of some theoretical constructs, sufficiently defined to allow hypotheses to be derived from them. In short, *BLC Theory* serves as a *hermeneutic, strategic tool*, defining a *research agenda* aimed at reducing our ignorance with respect to four fundamental questions of language acquisition and language use.

The main constructs

There are two dimensions of language proficiency (also called language ability or language cognition):

1. *Basic Language Cognition* (BLC) versus *Higher Language Cognition* (HLC), also called *Extended Language Cognition*. BLC pertains to (1) the largely implicit, unconscious knowledge in the domains of phonetics, prosody, phonology, morphology and syntax, (2) the largely explicit, conscious knowledge in the lexical domain (form-meaning mappings), *in combination with* (3) the automaticity with which these types of knowledge can be processed. BLC is restricted to frequent lexical items and frequent grammatical structures, that is, to lexical items and morpho-syntactic structures that may occur in any communicative situation, common to all adult L1-ers, regardless of age, literacy, or educational level. HLC is the complement or extension of BLC. HLC is identical to BLC, except that, (1) in HLC, utterances that can be understood or produced contain low-frequency lexical items or uncommon morpho-syntactic structures, and that (2) HLC utterances pertain to written as well as spoken language. In other words, HLC utterances are lexically and grammatically more complex (and often longer) than BLC utterances and they need not be spoken.

2. *Core* versus *Periphery*. Core linguistic cognition includes knowledge in the phonetic-phonological, morphonological, morpho-syntactic, and lexical domains and knowledge of how to use language forms appropriate to the communicative situation (including pragmatic knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge, and knowledge of discourse organization). Peripheral linguistic cognition includes interactional ability (i.e., the general ability – not specific to a particular language - to communicate with other people in monolingual and multilingual encounters), strategic competence of how to perform in verbal communication under adverse conditions (e.g., time constraint) or with limited linguistic knowledge, metalinguistic knowledge (explicit knowledge of grammar), and knowledge of the characteristics of various types of oral and written discourse.

3. While BLC falls within the Core, HLC pertains to both Core and Periphery (Figure 1).

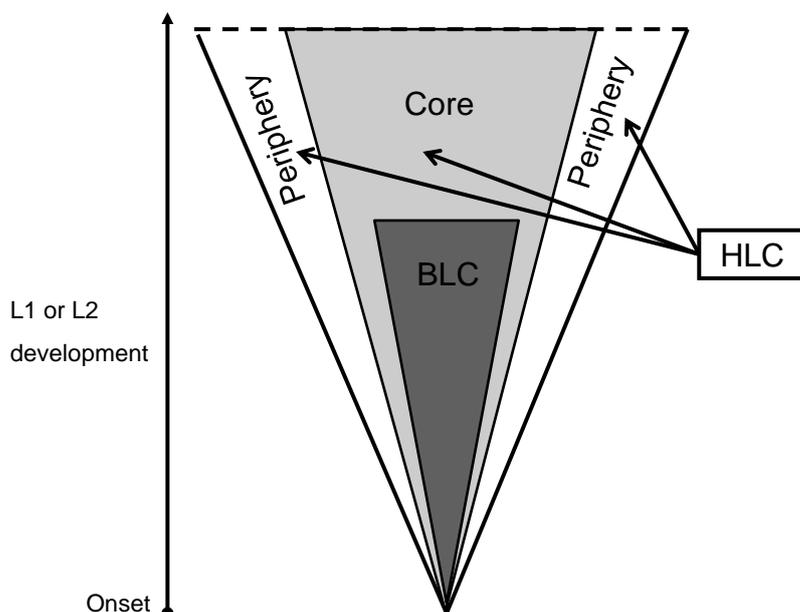


Figure 1. Core and peripheral components of language proficiency with BLC situated within, and thus partially overlapping with Core Language Proficiency. As the three arrows illustrate, HLC pertains to Peripheral Language Proficiency as well as to the part of Core Language Proficiency that does not overlap with BLC.

Across a population of speakers of a language (i.e., in sociolinguistic terms), *BLC Theory* conceives of language cognition not as a continuum but as a dichotomy. This idea is based on the fact that, in the domains of lexis and morpho-syntax, there is a minority of elements (words, constructions, expressions) that occur extremely frequently, while there is a large majority of elements that occur infrequently. If it is correct to say that the elements of lexis and morpho-syntax for a given language map on a Zipfian distribution, with few elements occurring very frequently and, after a distinct twist in the frequency curve, most elements occurring infrequently, then there is ground to hypothesize that control of these elements can be conceptualized as constituting a dichotomy. Of course, for each individual L1 and L2 learner, the acquisition process itself (i.e., the development of language proficiency) is gradual and this is true for both the acquisition of BLC and the acquisition of HLC.

Native speaker. In social terms, a native speaker is someone who typically acquires the language as a young child (before school age) and maintains the language into adulthood. In linguistic terms, a native speaker can be defined as someone who has acquired BLC and who may have acquired some or many elements of HLC.

Corollaries

C1. All adult L1ers (not suffering from cognitive impairments), regardless of differences in age and intellectual functioning, are able to comprehend and produce, both correctly and quickly, isolated utterances consisting of high-frequency lexical phrases and high-frequency morpho-syntactic structures (at the steep side of the Zipfian distribution), when these utterances are perceived under normal acoustical conditions.

C2. Individual differences among adult L1ers will be relatively large in tasks involving HLC discourse, in all four modes of language use (reading, writing, listening and speaking) but all

adult L1ers will perform at ceiling in BLC tasks, i.e., conceptually simple oral tasks (listening and speaking), involving highly frequent linguistic units.

C3. Although the speed with which humans can process information increases over time until it reaches a peak around the age of 22 and from the age of 27 on gradually decreases, the vast majority of old people remain capable of processing linguistic information fast enough to allow for relatively unimpaired functional language use, provided that they continue to practice their language skills on a daily basis and do not suffer from severe mental disorders. This claim holds for all languages someone has acquired. In other words, continued language use modulates the decline in processing speed in old age, while the continued use of written language is modulated by level of education, type of occupation and interests.

C4. Early bilinguals can attain native-speaker proficiency in more than one language as long as they minimally acquire BLC in each language.

C5. BLC, while being attainable by late L2 learners in the domains of vocabulary and many or even most grammatical structures, will generally not be attainable in the domains of pronunciation or with respect to the production of some grammatical features in spontaneous, unmonitored speech.

C6. Late L2 learners can become as proficient in HLC as L1ers of the same intellectual, educational, professional and cultural profile, despite some deficiencies in their L2 BLC.

C7. The likelihood of a person acquiring BLC in two (or more) languages is determined (i) by age of onset, and (ii) amount of exposure and productive language use.

Empirical matters

1. It is an empirical matter at which age L1ers have acquired BLC.
2. It is an empirical matter whether BLC age differs between societies (onset of literacy education) and between languages.

References

Hulstijn, J.H. (2015). *Language proficiency in native and non-native speakers: Theory and research*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publ. Comp.

Language Proficiency in Native and Non-native Speakers

Theory and research

Jan H. Hulstijn

University of Amsterdam

This book, written for both seasoned and novice researchers, presents a theory of what is called Basic and Higher Language Cognition (BLC and HLC), a theory aimed at making some fundamental issues concerning first and second language learning and bilingualism (more) empirical. The first part of the book provides background for and explication of the theory as well as an agenda for future research, while the second part reports on selected studies of language proficiency in native speakers, as well as non-native speakers, and studies of the relationship between literacy in a first and second language. Conceptual and methodological problems in measuring language proficiency in research on second language acquisition and bilingualism are also discussed. Further, the notion of levels of language proficiency, as rendered by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), is critically examined, suggesting ways of empirically investigating a number of questions that the CEFR raises but is not capable of answering.

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