



CASLA research highlights 2011

CASLA projects

NWO-funded project *Studies in Listening Proficiency*, conducted by Sible Andringa, Nomi Olsthoorn, Catherine van Beuningen, Rob Schoonen and Jan Hulstijn: In 2011, the first results were obtained and presented at several international conferences (AAAL, Chicago; ISB, Oslo; AILA, Beijing; Eurosla, Stockholm, and the A. Guiora / Language Learning roundtable, Nijmegen), pertaining to several different project interests. Variation in native speaker proficiency is one of these interests, and we demonstrated that differences in people's daily reading and writing experiences can explain why some people are more proficient than others in sentence processing. In addition, we used our data to demonstrate that biased native-speaker norm groups have been used in critical-period hypothesis research, which may have affected decisions about L2 learners' attainment of nativelike levels of proficiency. Another interest concerns the comparison of native and non-native listening proficiency, and the results of this comparison suggested that differences in success in native listening comprehension are explained by differences in linguistic knowledge and verbal processing speed, whereas for the non-natives success in listening was a function linguistic knowledge and reasoning ability.

NWO funded project *What is Speaking Proficiency*, conducted by Nivja de Jong, Margarita Steinel, Arjen Florijn, Rob Schoonen and Jan Hulstijn. In the annual report of 2009 we reported some of the findings of study 1 of this project. Study 1 examines the associations between the speaking proficiency of 181 adult learners of Dutch as a second language and their linguistic competences. We can now report that, of these 181 L2 learners, 80 and 30 participants were found to be, respectively, at the B1 and B2 levels of the scale Overall Oral Production of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). Discriminant analyses showed that all linguistic competences measured separately (except speed of articulation) discriminated participants at the two levels of oral production. Subsequent comparisons showed that the distance between B1ers and B2ers was smaller in knowledge of high-frequency words than in knowledge of medium- and low-frequency words. Extrapolation from scores on the vocabulary test yielded estimations of productive vocabularies of, on average, 4,000 and 7,000 words for B1ers and B2ers, respectively. The grammar test assessed grammatical knowledge in ten domains. B2ers were found to outperform B1ers on all parts of the test. Thus, the differences in lexical and grammatical knowledge of B1ers and B2ers appear to be a matter of degree, rather than a matter of category or domain.

In study 2 of the project, conducted by Margarita Steinel (together with Jan Hulstijn, Arjen Florijn and Rob Schoonen), the factors affecting L2 speaking proficiency are investigated from the perspective of potential L1-related variability in subskill performance (focusing on knowledge of grammar and verb subcategorization frames in particular) despite close similarity in terms of level of functional adequacy of L2 speaking. In total, 70 people participated in the experiment - 53 L2 learners of Dutch, with English and Turkish as their mother tongue ($n = 26$ and $n = 27$, respectively), and 17 native speakers of Dutch. On the whole, the group of English participants performed significantly better in terms of speaking proficiency and scored slightly higher on knowledge of verb frames and vocabulary, though not significantly so, while at the same time they did not outperform the Turkish group with respect to two different measures of grammatical knowledge. The results on the subsections of the 'traditional' grammar test revealed that only in one area, verbal inflection, there were significant differences between the L1 groups as a whole such that the Turkish participants outperformed the English ones. Regression analyses revealed that the new measure reflecting knowledge of verb subcategorization frames was significantly related to functional adequacy of L2 speaking and, on its own, explained 77% of the variance. Additional analyses of error rates pertaining to participants' actual speaking performances for several grammatical categories revealed that the English participants outperformed the Turkish ones with respect to

inverted word order in main sentences and verb frames of verbs subcategorizing for prepositional complements, whereas the Turkish group performed significantly better in terms of subordinate clause word order. These differences did not surface when participants were assessed in a more controlled way by means of a written grammar test. These results need to be further broken down in terms of level of functional adequacy of L2 speaking.

In study 3 of the project, conducted by Nivja de Jong (co-authors Rachel Groenhout [research assistant], Rob Schoonen and Jan Hulstijn), 29 English and 24 Turkish native speakers performed speaking tasks in their L1 and in their L2 (Dutch). It was found that a large proportion of the variance of the L2 fluency measures could be predicted on the basis of the L1 measures. L2 vocabulary knowledge, as an index of L2 proficiency, was correlated to L2 fluency measures (uncorrected), as well as to L2 fluency measures that were adjusted for L1 fluency (corrected). For all measures, except for duration of pauses, both the corrected and the uncorrected measures significantly predicted L2 vocabulary knowledge. For mean syllable duration the corrected measure was a stronger predictor of L2 proficiency than the uncorrected measure. Combining the results from this study with the large-scale study on fluency (reported on in the previous report), we can now conclude that the fluency measure syllable duration is a good predictor of L2 proficiency. The fluency measure duration of silent pauses in L2 speech, however, is only weakly related to measures of L2 proficiency and seems to be dependent on individual speaking style.

In her NWO-funded, longitudinal study *Literacy-related attributes of at risk students in grades 7-9* PhD candidate Mirjam Trapman (supervisors Jan Hulstijn and Amos van Gelderen) found that linguistic knowledge, fluency and knowledge about text characteristics are substantially associated with reading comprehension of adolescent low achievers. However, the role of these predictor variables appears to be different for the monolingual and bilingual students: knowledge is more important in explaining reading comprehension of bilinguals, whereas fluency is more important in explaining the monolinguals' reading comprehension. Furthermore, results of longitudinal analyses reveal that individual differences in later reading comprehension ability (grades 8 and 9), can to a large extent be predicted by individual differences found in reading comprehension in earlier grades. In addition, differences in linguistic knowledge account for a small but significant proportion of the variance. Writing proficiency of the low achieving students is predicted by linguistic knowledge, which also predicts a small proportion of writing proficiency in later years when writing proficiency in earlier grades is accounted for. In grade 9 knowledge of text characteristics adds to this.

In her project *Accessibility of semantic networks in the mental lexicon of Dutch L1 and L2 children*, PhD candidate Marjolein Cremer (first supervisor Rob Schoonen) confirmed in a new experiment, using priming techniques, that individual differences in reading comprehension can (to a small extent) be accounted for by differences in accessibility of semantic word knowledge. In this new experiment accessibility was operationalized as *automatic* activation of the semantic knowledge as measured with lexical and semantic priming.

In her project *The bilingual language development of the Frisian child*, PhD candidate Jelske Dijkstra (first supervisor Folkert Kuiken) monitors the development of a bilingual (Frisian/Dutch) vocabulary of 98 toddlers during three successive periods of six months. The results of the first two periods, when the participants are aged between 2;6-3;6 years, indicate that an effect of home language is present in both receptive and productive vocabulary in Frisian and Dutch. Interestingly, this effect is largest in Dutch receptive vocabulary. Further analyses are necessary to explain these results, as are comparisons with the data gathered in the third and last period of this longitudinal study.

In her research project on language attitudes among minority groups, Elisabeth van der Linden investigated language attitudes among Hungarian-speaking teenagers in a town in Romania. In a comparison of a matched-guise technique study and a sociolinguistic questionnaire, she found that the language attitudes reflected by the responses of her subjects differed according to the method used. She claimed that research into language attitudes should always use several different methods in order to obtain nuanced and reliable results.

Quotes from papers published in 2011

Discussing assessment of language proficiency in SLA: "(...) there is no underlying ability continuum that maps to the quantity of linguistic features used or understood. This should make us cautious in using these kind of measures [frequency counts of structures and lexical features] as part of the assessment of language proficiency. They can be interesting tools to describe language use (as "typical behaviour"), but inferences about language ability might be one step too far." (p. 712).

Discussing important questions regarding operationalizations of language ability in SLA research: "(...) Addressing these questions should lead to a theory of response behaviour (cf. Borsboom et al., 2004; Snow & Lohman, 1989); a response behaviour in which the abilities we want to measure are essential and causally related to the outcomes, that is the quality of the language performance, so that we learn how language ability is best assessed for a given purpose." (p. 712).

Source: Schoonen, R. (2011). How language ability is assessed. In E. Hinkel (ed). *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*, Volume II (p. 701-716). New York and London : Routledge (ch. 42).

"Our findings point to substantial differences among native speakers both in linguistic subskills and in speaking proficiency, suggesting that it is impossible to define the prototypical native speaker in terms of language ability. We presume that such differences reflect the level and amount of verbal activities in people's daily lives, of which level of education and level of profession may only form an imperfect index." (p. 492)

Source: Mulder, K., & Hulstijn, J.H. (2011). Linguistic skills of adult native speakers, as a function of age and level of education. *Applied Linguistics*, 32/5, 475-494.

"Since Chomsky (1965) claimed that all adult native speakers share the same grammatical competence ("the ideal speaker-hearer's intrinsic competence"; p. 4), most researchers, except sociolinguists and speech therapists, have simply taken the proposition for granted, neglecting the obligation of finding out to what extent it can be empirically upheld."(p. 232)

Source: Hulstijn, J.H. (2011). Language proficiency in native and nonnative speakers: An agenda for research and suggestions for second-language assessment. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 8, 229-249.