

Second Language Reading and Instruction

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Reading comprehension is a process in which words are interpreted and meaning is created. We read for a variety of reasons: to obtain information, to communicate, and for enjoyment. In order to comprehend or assign meaning to a text, various linguistic, conceptual, reasoning, and meta-cognitive abilities must work efficiently and simultaneously within the reader (Grabe, 1991; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Views on second language reading have been greatly influenced by research on first language reading. Second language reading research strives to understand what ‘good’ first language readers do and tries to guide second language instructors, learners, and readers in that direction (Catts & Kamhi, 2005; Grabe, 1991; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). However, in order to effectively do so, it is essential to understand what reading is and its multifaceted nature, both in a reader’s first as well as second language.

Reading comprehension is dependent upon lower-level processing and higher-level processing working in tandem. Lower-level processing, which includes lexical access, syntactic parsing, semantic proposition formation, and working memory, helps the reader process written language from letters to words to meaning. In higher-level processing, the reader uses his schema, prior knowledge, and ability to make inferences about the meaning of the text. Whether one reads in his/her first or second language, successful reading always requires the use of both higher and lower level processing. However, a key difference between reading in one’s first language and reading in a second language is that reading in one’s second language relies more heavily on lower-level processing. Jeon and Yamashita’s (2014) meta-analysis revealed that second language grammar knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, and decoding, which feed into lower-level processing, are highly correlated with second language reading comprehension.

Moreover, reading in a second language necessitates the simultaneous use of multiple cognitive and linguistic skills. It can be challenging for second language readers who may not have fully developed the lower-level processing skills (e.g., decoding, grammatical ability, and vocabulary knowledge) that are needed for effective comprehension. Thus, second language reading instruction could perhaps facilitate the development of learners’ lower-level processing skills. As such, second language instructors need to consider how reading instruction can maximize the benefits of reading in second language comprehension and acquisition (Han & D’Angelo, 2009; Krashen, 1993, 2004).

Krashen (1993, 2004) advocates for second language learners to engage in free voluntary reading, where learners read materials they have selected based on their interests and language proficiency level. He argues that learners who expose themselves to text that is comprehended may acquire vocabulary and grammatical forms better than learners who do not read as much. For Krashen, acquisition is the byproduct of comprehension. However, studies (e.g., Swain, 1991) have shown that acquisition does not occur as a result of comprehension.

Sharwood Smith (1986) argues that comprehension and acquisition are two separate processes; although they work together, the presence of one is not indicative of the presence of the other. Rather he would argue that input has dual relevance: comprehension *and* acquisition. Acquisition comes after linguistic restructuring and processing; comprehending a text may help acquisition, but it may not be the cause of it. For second language reading to realize its dual

potential, both bottom-up and top-down processing is necessary as it would likely lead to adequate comprehension and, potentially, acquisition.

A dual approach (Han & D'Angelo, 2009) to teaching second language reading, an approach that emphasizes reading for comprehension as well as reading for acquisition, was proposed as a way to help learners develop both semantic and syntactic processing skills. Complementing this dual approach to reading instruction are pedagogical strategies derived from research on the effects of instruction in second language acquisition. Han and D'Angelo (2009) discuss three such strategies. The first is textual input enhancement (Sharwood Smith, 1993), whereby target linguistic constructions are typographically enhanced, via underlining, capitalizing, bolding, etc., to make them more salient and thereby more noticeable to learners. Increasing opportunities for noticing in this way is desirable, given that noticing is an essential condition for second language learning (Schmidt, 1990, 1995). Although textual input enhancement might elicit noticing of linguistic forms, research to date has shown that textual enhancement alone may not be sufficient for promoting acquisition.

A second pedagogical strategy is processing instruction (VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993; VanPatten & Sanz, 1995), which focuses on altering learners' natural, L1-primed input processing strategies to promote better intake. Processing instruction consists of three components. Learners are provided with explicit information about the target form, learners are informed of the input-processing strategies that might negatively affect their processing of the target structure, and learners engage in structured input activities that help them understand and process grammatical forms during comprehension (VanPatten 1996, 2004). Processing instruction is compatible with the dual approach to second language reading instruction as it fosters attention to form while processing input for meaning.

A third pedagogical strategy discussed by Han and D'Angelo (2009) is narrow reading, which refers to reading in one subject matter or texts by the same writer (Krashen 1981, 2004). Drawing upon Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), proponents of narrow reading claim that exposure to large amounts of meaningful text leads to incidental language acquisition (Gass & Selinker, 2008). The narrow yet focused scope of the readings allows for repeated encounters with linguistic elements, which in turn facilitate noticing and intake for development of linguistic competence.

The three pedagogical strategies discussed—textual input enhancement, input processing, and narrow reading—all show that meaning-bearing input can serve as a vehicle for language learning. Second language reading instructors face a unique challenge in the classroom because they must engage learners in new reading practices while reinforcing, reaffirming, and utilizing pre-existing ones learners bring from their L1 experience. In light of this, second language reading instruction should help learners strengthen reading ability beyond just comprehending a text, and should facilitate both second language comprehension and acquisition.

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