More than Meets the Eye

Foreign Language Reading: Theory and Practice

Marva A. Barnett
University of Virginia

Language in Education
Theory and Practice

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M.A.B.

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Professor Barnett is also the author of *Lire avec plaisir: Stratégies de lecture*, a practical application of her research in foreign language reading strategy use. She is the author of articles published in *Modern Language Journal, ADFL Bulletin, Foreign Language Annals*, and *The French Review*.

Although she has specialized in studying how students learn reading , she is also interested in the writing process and has presented papers at conferences of the International Association of Applied Linguistics, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Northeast Conference, the Seminar East of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL), and the Modern Language Convention. She also serves as a consultant on language pedagogy and on working with students who have language learning disabilities.

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Introduction

Background

To teach foreign or second language reading well, we need to know as much as possible about how the reading process works and how to integrate that knowledge effectively into our reading pedagogy. Researchers and teachers are fortunate to have at their disposition numerous resources from colleagues studying first language learning. With interdisciplinary insights from such diverse fields as psychology, sociology, education, and theoretical and applied linguistics, second and foreign language researchers and theorists have a new awareness of the mental processes underlying language use and a deepening respect for the complexities of these processes. For instance, from the advent of artificial intelligence research, we have the beginnings of computer simulations of learning processes. We also recognize how expectations defined by readers' cultures influence what they understand when reading. We are delving into reader strategies and exploring how we can help weaker readers use more effective strategies for comprehending. We are aware that reader purposes and approaches to written texts vary, depending on many factors, including text types, readers' language abilities, cognitive development, interest, and readers' willingness to take risks in predicting and guessing meanings. We recognize the heterogeneity of readers. We are comparing what we know and hypothesize about the first and second language reading processes and, as a result, are expanding our pool of knowledge. As the growing science of second language acquisition establishes appropriate research tools and experimental models (cf. Beebe, 1988; VanPatten, Dvorak, & Lee, 1987), we are less willing to overgeneralize and oversimplify than in the past. Research in second and foreign language reading is coming of age.

From the era of the grammar-translation method, reading skill has generally held an important place in foreign/second language study and teaching, with the exception of the era of the audiolingual method. Now, however, we see reading in a different light: as

communication, as a mental process, as the reader's active participation in the creation of meaning, as a manipulation of strategies, as a *receptive* rather than as a *passive* skill. Reading is a primary means of language acquisition. For Krashen (1981), comprehensible input is vital for language acquisition, and reading is an inimitable source of such input. Within the proficiency framework established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), reading and listening are valued as receptive skills in which the reader or listener actively *produces understanding* (Byrnes, 1985). Also, somewhat indirectly, the intense emphasis on *oral* skills early in the proficiency movement provoked increased, reactive attention to reading (Hummel, 1985). Within traditional programs, moreover, reading is still valued as essential to appreciating target language literature. Reading is the skill adults can most easily maintain and improve independent of established language courses. The main reason people around the world study English as a foreign language is to read(Carrell, 1988a). Finally, within the educational system and the nation at large, literacy is a momentous issue; better understanding of the second language reading process and developing students' reading skills in a foreign language may help us address this larger concern. For many reasons, then, foreign/second language reading is currently a popular focal point for language learning/acquisition research.

Second and *Foreign* Language Reading: Some Differences

As reading theory and research mature, specialists increasingly distinguish between the circumstances of people learning a *second language* from those learning a *foreign* language. The term *second language reading* suggests a diverse learner population, because it usually refers to learning another language while living in a community dominated by that second language and culture (e.g., students of English as a second language (ESL) [cf. Dubin, Eskey & Grabe, 1986; and the work of Barnitz, 1985; Carrell, all works listed; Clarke, 1980; Devine,1981, 1984, 1987; Hudelson, 1981,1984; Perkins, 1983]). These learners may range from childhood age well into adulthood, representing varying levels of cognitive development; they come from many different cultural backgrounds; they have divergent first language educational backgrounds; they may or may not be literate

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