

English L2 Reading

Getting to the Bottom

THIRD EDITION

Barbara M. Birch



ESL & APPLIED LINGUISTICS PROFESSIONAL SERIES

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English L2 Reading

English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom offers teachers research-based insights into bottom-up skills in reading English as a second language and a solid foundation on which to build reading instruction. Core linguistic and psycholinguistic concepts are presented within the context of their application to teaching. The goal is to balance or supplement (not replace) top-down approaches and methodologies with effective low-level options for teaching English reading.

The text's pedagogical features engage readers of the text in moving easily from linguistic details and psycholinguistic data and theory to practical explanations and suggestions for teaching. Pre-reading Questions challenge them to analyze their own experience as readers. Study Guide Questions allow readers to review, discuss, or assess their knowledge. Discussion Questions elaborate on themes in each chapter. Spotlight on Teaching sections offer practical information and hands-on experience in preparing lessons or activities. Two Appendices provide tables that list the graphemes or the phonemes of English.

Many teachers of L2 students are interested in supplementing top-down teaching approaches to teaching reading with bottom-up reading strategies, but aren't sure how to do it. The third edition of this popular, comprehensive, myth-debunking text continues to fill that gap.

Changes in the Third Edition

- Shift in focus from criticism of whole language methodologies to a more neutral stance—times have changed and the study of lower-level reading strategies is now mainstream
- Greater focus on linguistic form, along with function and meaning
- Updated information about reading strategies at each level of the reading process
- More Spotlight on Teaching sections, one for each chapter
- New chapter on spelling development

Barbara M. Birch is Professor in the Department of Linguistics at California State University, Fresno, USA.

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For my family

Preface

This third edition of *English L2 Reading* is significantly different from the first and the second editions. The content and organization of each chapter is much the same, but the focus has been shifted away from criticism of whole language methodologies and towards a more neutral stance. When this book was first published in 2002, and even when the second edition came out in 2006, there were still many reading teachers and researchers who did not believe that different writing systems or orthographies mattered very much. There were important myths about reading and reading instruction that needed to be debunked. However, times have changed. Now the study of lower-level reading strategies is mainstream, and there are few teachers or researchers who still believe that higher level cognitive strategies can make up for deficiencies in basic language proficiency. There is a greater focus on linguistic form, along with function and meaning. Besides these substantive stylistic changes, more specific revisions in this edition include:

- Updated information about reading strategies at each level of the reading process.
- Changes to the figures, study guide questions, and discussion activities.
- More Spotlight on Teaching sections, one for each chapter.
- A new chapter on spelling development.

Approach

An ideology is more than just a theory or a practice. It is a complex body of interrelated concepts, opinions, and assumptions about an area of culture. Different ideologies are the foundations for different social positions. Nowhere is this truer than in education and, in education, nowhere is this truer than in the area of reading research and methodology. One ideology dominated second language reading for quite a while. This ideology, usually called whole language, has many ideas and practices

that have stood the test of time in research and in the classroom. Many English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) readers benefit greatly from this instruction, which generally takes a top-down view of reading, because students learn to take full advantage of their cognitive abilities to comprehend the text.

This book strongly supports the whole language ideology in general. The materials are exciting and interesting, and the methods are inviting and creative. In the hands of an expert teacher, students learn useful reading and vocabulary acquisition strategies. They learn about the importance of cultural knowledge and the characteristics of textual discourse, such as coherence and cohesion. Students learn to enjoy and appreciate reading and writing. But whole language on its own is incomplete in that it seems to deemphasize certain aspects of reading.

A complete, balanced reading ideology (a “truly whole” language ideology) embraces all reading theories and practices. In particular, it accommodates researchers and teachers who find that attention to the details of language, or a “focus on form” approach, helps students learn to read better. This book takes the position that supplementing whole language with a bottom-up focus makes reading instruction truly holistic. In fact, research into native English reading processes includes both the top and the bottom of the reading process; that is, higher level cognitive knowledge and abilities are important, but so are low-level linguistic knowledge and abilities. The result is a more accurate and well-rounded view of reading and how English-speaking and English-learning children become successful readers.

In general terms, this book is intended for all ESL and EFL practitioners interested in or involved in teaching reading. It is relevant to those who are teaching illiterate people to read in English or to those whose students already know how to read in their native language. Taking a fairly theory-neutral information-processing perspective for the sake of the organization and presentation of complex material, the book is relevant to reading researchers, curriculum designers, and materials writers. It is for teachers-in-training as well.

Overview

Chapter 1 introduces several of the organizing threads to be followed throughout the book. In this chapter, reading is described as an interactive (top-down and bottom-up) process; this model is expanded in each subsequent chapter. The reading process is also called an expert decision-making system based on a knowledge base (world and language) and high- and low-level processing strategies. Early developmental stages of native English reading are discussed in this chapter that will be applied to ESL and EFL learners in later chapters.

Chapter 2 is a general discussion of a few of the common writing systems in the world and their differences.

Chapter 3 begins another organizing thread for the book: that knowledge and processing strategies develop in response to L1, that they transfer positively and/or negatively to L2, and that strategies optimal for reading English may not develop without direct instruction. This point is illustrated by four sample case histories that are followed throughout the remaining chapters: MariCarmen, a Spanish reader; Despina, a Greek reader; Mohammed, an Arabic reader, and Ho, a Chinese reader.

Chapter 4 is a crucial chapter in the book, because it shows that accurate listening comprehension is directly related to reading; it is more directly related than perfectly accurate pronunciation. This chapter discusses the consonant and vowel sounds of English and presents some of the most critical and complex concepts in linguistics: phoneme, phone, allophone.

Chapter 5 introduces the concept of the grapheme (as opposed to “letter”) and presents charts of the English graphemes.

Chapter 6 argues that English spelling has some organizing principles based on morphology and spelling conventions.

Chapter 7 describes several approaches to phonics instruction in English L1 after outlining the strategies that native English-speaking readers develop to handle English vowels, because the correspondence between vowel graphemes and phonemes is not very predictable. Recent research from L1 English reading shows that children go through a number of different processing strategies until they ultimately settle on the best strategies for English: the use of onsets and rimes and analogy to known spelling patterns. A “smart” phonics methodology takes advantage of what is known about how children learn to read.

Chapter 8 revisits the theme that English spelling is systematic by examining typical morphological and phonological processes in English and spelling difficulties that stem from them. English writing follows fairly consistent morphophonemic spelling rules. There is evidence that readers use different processing strategies to deal with morphological information in reading L1 and L2.

Chapter 9 is a new chapter about spelling development in English-speaking children and some of the problems specific to English learners.

Chapter 10 is an exploration of word learning and word recognition, suggesting that readers build up an ample mental lexicon in L2 by becoming active word learners.

Chapter 11 discusses the goal of reading instruction, automaticity and fluency, and discusses some critical aspects about testing and instruction. In general, this book fits within the emphasis on accuracy of form (along with meaning and use) as an important component of communication.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the reviewers and editors whose perceptive comments at various stages have made this manuscript what it is today. I am very grateful for the unfailing support I have received from Naomi Silverman at Routledge and Eli Hinkel, Series Editor for the ESL & Applied Linguistics series. I would like to remember Dr. David Eskey, who was the inspiration for this book.

I am also indebted to all of my colleagues in the Department of Linguistics at California State University-Fresno for their encouragement and help and for providing me with the opportunity to teach Linguistics and Reading, which was where this manuscript began over 20 years ago. I must also thank those students of Linguistics 132 and graduate students who read earlier versions, gave insightful feedback, and helped me pilot materials. I am grateful to Dean Vida Samiian for some time released from teaching so that I could rewrite this book for a third edition. Any mistakes are still, of course, my own.

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The Expert Decision-Maker

Prereading Questions

Before you read, think about and discuss the following:

1. How do people read? What happens in your mind when you are reading?
2. Do you remember learning to read as a child? Was it a positive or negative experience?
3. Do you enjoy reading now? Why or why not?
4. What do you *have* to read? What do you *like* to read? How are these reading experiences different for you?
5. If you are a nonnative speaker of English, do you like to read English as well as your native language? Why or why not?
6. What problems do you have with reading? What is the cause of the problems?

Study Guide Questions

Answer these questions while or after reading the chapter. Try to put your answers into your own words.

1. What are the two models that help people understand or explain the reading process?
2. Explain the components of Figure 1.1.
3. Explain the components of Figure 1.2.
4. What are the developmental stages in reading?
5. What does Figure 1.3 represent?
6. What are the Acculturation Principle, the Phonology Principle, the Interactive Processing Principle, and the Mapping Principle?
7. What special considerations make English reading difficult for English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learners?

When people sit down to read something, their eyes move across and down the page understanding the message that the text contains without apparent effort. Such an unconscious process seems simple, but in fact, like many of the other mental activities people habitually do, reading is complex when examined in all its detail. It is complicated because it involves a great deal of precise knowledge that must be learned and many processing strategies that must be practiced until they are automatic.

This chapter deals with several introductory topics necessary to understand the reading process. First, the reading process is very complex and abstract; it is not easy to explain or understand. Researchers often use models to compare such complex and abstract mental processes to something people understand more easily. Models are pedagogical tools or analogies that permit explanation of some of the details of reading in a systematic way. Models provide a coherent framework on which to arrange the linguistic information that expert readers need to acquire and that teachers need to know.

Second, this chapter explores the stages that English-speaking children go through as they learn to read, and some universal principles that seem to be involved in learning to read. This discussion is a starting point for examining English L2 (English as a second or foreign language) reading. English L2 readers face some special circumstances when they learn to read English: interference from their first language, incomplete knowledge of English, and missing processing strategies for English.

Two Models of the Reading Process

A complex mental ability like reading can be compared to a computational flowchart that organizes and presents graphically the information known or hypothesized about it and how that information is related within the model. It is useful to think of reading first as a kind of information processing system and second as a kind of expert decision making system, because those models capture some essential characteristics of the reading process.

The Interactive Information Processing System

The Interactive Information Processing System includes different parts and procedures that illustrate the different skills of reading and their interaction for successful reading. There are two basic parts to the processing system, a knowledge storage component and a dynamic processing component that uses strategies to cope with the text. Such a model might look like Figure 1.1.

The reading system includes storage for cultural and linguistic knowledge in long-term memory. The knowledge is organized into memory

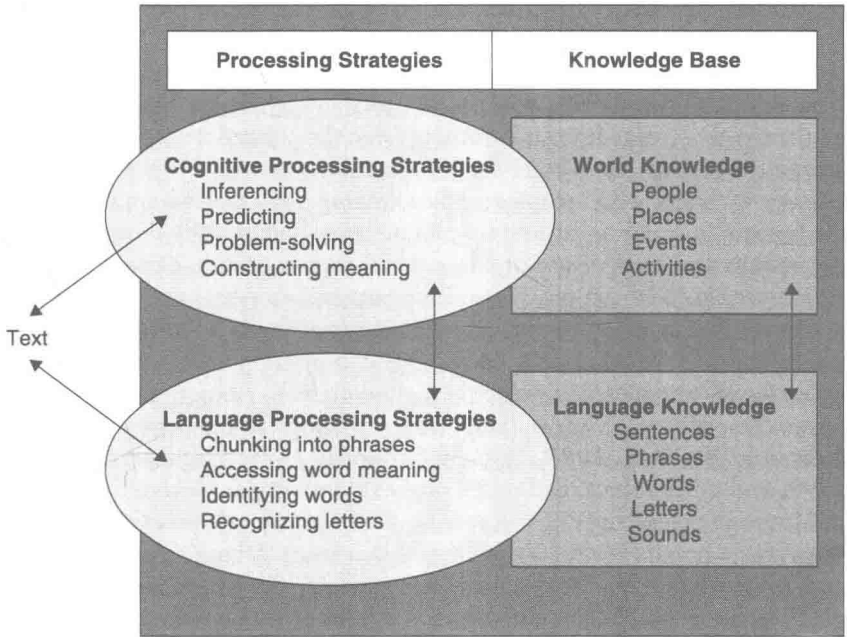


Figure 1.1. A hypothetical Interactive Information Processing Model of the reading process with some sample processing strategies and types of knowledge

structures like images, networks, schemas, and frames, which are discussed in later chapters. The knowledge base is not sufficient for reading by itself, because it cannot interact directly with the text without processing mechanisms. The processing component consists of a variety of strategies that the reader must intentionally learn or acquire by practice. The strategies allow the reader to take the text as a source of information and, drawing on the knowledge base as another source, make sense of what is on the printed page. The processing strategies can be consciously or unconsciously applied; that is, they can operate automatically beneath the level of awareness or they can kick in selectively because of conscious attention to something perceived.

The Top and the Bottom of the System. The processor uses cultural and world knowledge and generalized cognitive processing strategies at the “top” to construct a meaning for texts (sentences, paragraphs, or stories). Using these high-level processing strategies the reader makes predictions about what the text is going to be like, inferences about the motivations of the characters, decisions about how certain events are related in the reading, and the like. The bottom of the model contains

precise bits of knowledge about language and writing as well as mental processing strategies that turn squiggles on the page into meaningful symbols.

In the reading system, the processing strategies work together in parallel, that is, at the same time, with access to the knowledge base to permit readers to construct ideas and meaning from the printed text. When people are reading, they need both the information flowing upward from the bottom to the top and the information flowing downward from the top to the bottom in order to understand the meaning successfully. For example, perception and recognition of letters leads to recognition of words, from which people construct meanings. In the other direction, contextual information, inferences, and world knowledge influence the processing strategies at lower levels. World knowledge can affect people's expectations about words and meaning, which can allow them to recognize some words faster than others or understand some meanings faster than others (see Aebersold & Field, 1997, Day & Bamford, 1998, Urquhart & Weir, 1998, and other recent reading theory texts for similar views).

Although researchers now know that information flows in both directions while people are reading, there is still some debate among teachers and teacher-trainers about which is the most important for successful reading. Some emphasize the top-down flow of information, sometimes to the neglect of the bottom levels of processing. This point of view is generally associated with an approach called whole language instruction. Others place more importance on bottom-up flow of information to the detriment of comprehension of meaning and world knowledge. This is most often called the phonics approach to reading.

A Balanced Approach. In this book, a balanced or integrated approach is adopted because neither direction of information flow is more important than the other. Successful readers must be adept at both bottom-up and top-down processing. Instead of focusing on bottom-up processing to the exclusion of top-down or vice versa, an approach that emphasizes the interactive nature of reading is chosen. Indeed, reading is interactive in three ways:

- The different processing strategies, both top and bottom, along with the knowledge base, interact with each other to accomplish the reading.
- Readers' minds interact with the written text so that they can understand the message.
- Readers interact indirectly with the writer of the text across time and space because it is the writer who is communicating information to readers, but readers must grasp the information from the writer.

After describing an interactive approach to reading much like this one, Eskey (1988: 97) advocated an approach to English L2 reading that