

My Understanding of Second Language Reading

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Introduction

My second language is Japanese, and since leaving Japan to attend graduate school in my home country, I often use reading as a method for maintaining and improving my language skills. When doing this reading, I feel a variety of emotions: excitement, frustration, joy, disappointment, boredom, nostalgia, and many others. Eventually, a small voice inside my head begins to say, “why are you reading this language? This is taking forever! Quit messing around and give me something in English!” I lived in Japan for six years, and while living there, I had to read Japanese – I had no choice. However, in the United States, I struggle to motivate myself to read in my second language, a common problem for all second language readers, and especially troublesome, I expect, for all of us who love to read in our first language, and comfortably and proficiently read to acquire information from materials in our first language. Luckily, advanced technologies for aiding the practice of reading in a second language are now available to ease the frustration, disappointment, and boredom.

Reading is a complicated mental activity, and mastering reading in any language requires numerous years of practice and a lifelong commitment. We make this commitment because a strong reading ability is indispensable in the modern world. And for many people, learning to read in a second language is an important addition to the literacy skills of their first-language, and likely essential for those who are learning to read English, Chinese, or any other major language as a second language. Learning to read in a second language requires a complicated interaction of cognitive processes, intensive reading practice, extensive reading practice, a careful management of attitude and motivation, and acquisition and awareness of a variety of reading strategies and skills. Fortunately for the modern reader of a second language, advanced technologies are helping to make most of these efforts easier, more effective, and more palatable.

A Complicated Interaction of Cognitive Processes

Reading in a second language requires a complicated interaction of cognitive processes: “When we recognize the complexity of reading, its multiple purposes, and its many properties, it becomes clear that the cognitive processes that operate when we read must also be complex” (Grabe, 2010, Kindle Locations 657-658).

Among these many processes, the use of prior knowledge is one that promotes a stronger comprehension. Good readers use their knowledge of the world, knowledge of the language, knowledge of the type of text, and knowledge of the topic when reading (Day and Bamford, 1998). Indeed, second language reading teachers often require their students to actively think about the topic before reading. These pre-reading activities require the students to retrieve, make ready, and share the information that they already know about a topic.

Today, the abundance of multimedia information on the Internet can be used by teachers or individuals to explore a topic quickly, easily, and immediately. For those practicing second language reading with digital texts, [in-text hyperlinks](#) serve as ready-made introductions for unknown topics. Also, students have the option of reading about a topic in their first language. These days, students can quickly find the necessary background information for understanding a text with 2 clicks of their mouse button, and second language reading teachers can use blogs, social media, and other similar tools to allow students to share their knowledge about a topic asynchronously.

In addition to the use of background knowledge, students of second language reading need an “accurate, swift, and automatic visual recognition of vocabulary” (Day and Bamford,

1998, p. 12). This automatic recognition of a word, often called sight vocabulary, includes the immediate retrieval of the word's meaning and phonological representation. In order to gain the ability to efficiently recognize a large number of words in this way, Grabe recommends fluency activities such as reading with an audio version of the text (2010).

Once again, for those students reading digital texts, modern technologies can offer much assistance. Current text-to-speech technologies like the ones in Apple's and Google's latest operating systems allow for readers of second languages to turn any digital text into an audio version. In seconds, a student can listen to a digital reading of any selected text. Furthermore, Apple's latest operating system offers readers the option of turning any length of text into a digital audio recording that can be saved and shared for free, and used at any time (The quality of text-to-speech softwares is improving rapidly in recent years due to the increasing popularity of digital personal assistants like Google Now and Apple's Siri). These audio versions may also help to improve reading comprehension by helping the reader to acquire a better mental prosody of intonation and rhythm when reading in their second language (Pegolo, 1985).

Finally, Ellis has proven that comprehension processes depend heavily on the frequency of input (as cited in Grabe, 2010, Kindle Location 1695-1698). Second language readers need a great amount of exposure to a variety of input that contains repeating linguistic similarities. These readers need both implicit and explicit learning through repeated exposure to words, phrases, syntactic structures, semantic structures, and discourse markers in numerous reading materials. The explicit learning, for example, should include "the learning of new words on first encounters through explicit definitions" (Grabe, 2010, Kindle Location 1690).

For the modern reader, hypertext glosses offer immediate definitions for any word in a text. Before the 20th century, readers used a paper dictionary when they wanted to learn the meaning of an unknown word. Before the 21st century, a reader might have used an electronic dictionary. But these days, a reader needs only to tap the word with his or her finger to see the gloss, saving hours of time in comparison to the previous methods of glossing. Nation (2001) and others have shown that hyperglosses clearly benefit readers' vocabulary growth. And hyperglosses may aid in reading comprehension as well. Grabe (2010) has concluded that the "use of glosses for unknown words has proven to be helpful for reading comprehension. Glosses make the reading context easier to understand" (Kindle location 6812-6813).

Intensive and Extensive Reading Practice

Learning to read in a second language requires both intensive reading and extensive reading. The first promotes declarative knowledge through explicit learning, and the second promotes procedural knowledge through implicit learning. When doing intensive reading, students read more difficult, authentic texts and focus on understanding everything, including all grammatical structures, morphology, and vocabulary – students focus on understanding how the second language works. When doing extensive reading, students focus on the meaning of the text, and they follow several principles: students read as much as possible, they read a variety of topics, they choose what to read, they enjoy reading, they read for a general understanding of the story, they read easy materials, they choose when to read, they read silently, they usually read quickly, they learn about extensive reading from their teacher, and the teacher is a role model

(Day and Bamford, 1998). The benefits of technology for intensive reading and extensive reading are numerous.

If the goals and activities of intensive reading are, as Palmer said, to “take a text, study it line by line, referring at every moment to our dictionary and our grammar, comparing, analyzing, translating, and retaining every expression that it contains” (as cited in Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 5), modern technologies can significantly ease the burden of intensive reading practice.

For example, the Internet provides a seemingly limitless source of authentic, difficult reading materials for second language readers of all levels and most major languages. And when reading these digital texts, students can use the above mentioned hyperglosses to quickly learn the meaning of all unknown words, and can use Google, Visual Thesaurus, and other resources to explore the deeper components of word knowledge: orthography, morphology, parts of speech, pronunciation, multiple meanings, collocations, meaning associations, specific uses, and register (Grabe, 2010, Kindle Location 6543). Indeed, a Google image search provides an excellent picture of the deeper components of a word’s meaning, and the above mentioned text-to-speech software can be used at any time to immediately hear the pronunciation of any word.

Furthermore, Google Translate serves as a useful gloss for understanding unfamiliar grammatical structures. Quizlet, a free online and offline software, can be used to store all recently learned vocabulary and grammatical structures, and provides a variety of tools for studying and memorizing these. All of these digital tools are free and ready at any time for immediate, rapid, and easy usage. As a recent survey shows, students of second language reading realize that they can “do much more with digital texts” (“Website Survey Results,” n.d.).

For English language learners, the Internet provides a multitude of free reading materials for extensive reading too (with many reading materials available for other languages as well). While free sources of language learner literature are still scarce online, children's reading materials in English and many other languages are abundant. For example, the online magazine for National Geographic Education provides numerous reading materials for a variety of topics, has materials designed for different grade levels, and also provides language study materials and tools for young English speaking students, including hyperglosses. These materials are available at all times, and students can access these materials with mobile phones, tablets, and laptop computers, giving them the choice to read at any time of day and in any place – mobile computers and digital readers allow for spontaneous reading opportunities. Readability and similar software programs allow students to store reading materials for offline reading too.

Arnold has shown that online extensive reading programs can “increase students’ motivation to read, raise their confidence in their ability to read L2 texts, improve their reading ability, and encourage learners to read for pleasure outside of class” (2009, p. 360). When students use the vast resources of the Internet to find reading materials for extensive reading, find materials that interest them, and read often, their procedural knowledge of the language improves, and Day and Bamford’s *bookstrapping* takes hold (1998).

Management of Attitude and Motivation

According to Day and Bamford (1998), students are more motivated to read in a second language when the material is interesting, attractive, and available. As mentioned above, the Internet is a perfect repository of interesting, attractive, and readily available materials. Indeed,

one of the recent winners of a Pulitzer prize was praised for its attractive use of multimedia that was well integrated into the story (Branch, n.d.). Students are also more motivated to read in the second language when their sociocultural environment promotes it, rather than hindering it. Reading from a mobile phone, a tablet, or a laptop, and listening to text with headphones can shield a second language reader from the prying eyes and ears of would-be naysayers. And furthermore, online communities of learners give readers an environment where second language reading is valued and encouraged. These online communities can prevent the discouragement that might come from unsupportive friends and family. Motivation is also influenced by the attitudes that readers have for reading in a second language.

Drawing from previous models of reading attitude acquisition, Day and Bamford have identified four factors that influence the development of second language reading attitudes: the attitudes that readers have for reading in their first languages, previous experience in learning to read a second language, attitudes toward the people and culture of the second language, and the second language classroom environment (1998). While technologies may have little influence on the role of the second and third of these factors, technologies certainly play a role in shaping the first and fourth factors. In particular, these days, many young students are likely to have a positive attitude for reading in their first language when they read online, using mobile phones, blogs, social networks, or other modern tools for asynchronous communication. Why not allow a transfer of these positive attitudes to reading in the second language by continuing the use of blogs, social networks, and other online reading materials in the target language?

Acquisition and Awareness of Reading Strategies and Skills

Modern technologies may provide some support for the acquisition of traditional reading strategies, but more importantly, new literacies require the acquisition and awareness of new reading strategies. For example, when reading a paper text to find specific information quickly, second language reading students learn to scan for keywords in order to find the information as soon as possible. When reading a digital text, these students can use the search tool of a Web browser or computer to find a keyword instantaneously (usually by pressing the command button and F-button). If a second language reader does not know about this search tool, he or she is unprepared for the modern world of reading. Second language reading teachers need to ask themselves questions like these: Do my students know how to hypergloss? Do my students know how to use text-to-speech software? Do my students know how to evaluate online reading materials? Do my students know how to use boolean operators for Google searches? Do my students know how to adjust font sizes in digital texts? Do my students understand the organizational structure of different types of online texts? Do my students know about Kindle x-ray? Recent research confirms the existence of skills and strategies that are unique to new literacies (Larsen, 2010), and other research is beginning to define the key components that separate online reading comprehension from traditional forms of reading comprehension (Coiro, 2012).

Conclusion

In a recent article in *The International Herald Tribune*, the president of the New York Public Library, Anthony Marx, noted that all of America's largest publishing companies are now going to offer their electronic books for lending at public libraries. He calls this a "big step," and further notes that "E-book readership is rising much faster than readership of print books; digital books could soon be the most popular book format. Readership of our e-books soared 168 percent from 2011 to 2012; print circulation, while much larger, remained constant" (2013). In addition to library books, modern readers are already using their computers, phones, and tablets to read newspapers, magazines, tweets, blogs, posts, and numerous other reading materials with much greater frequency than the occasional reading of printed materials.

If digital texts will soon be the most common and popular form of reading material in industrialized nations, students of second language reading should learn how to use digital tools for aiding their practice of second language reading, and should learn the new literacies that will be necessary for the modern world of communications. Finally, publishers, second language teachers, and second language programs need to write and publish more language learner literature for the Internet.

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