MONIKA KUSIAK

Comparing L1 and L2/FL Reading

Reading in L1 seems a complex process; research studies have looked at the role of various factors influencing reading comprehension, such as reading strategies, vocabulary, discourse organization or reader motivations. The issue becomes even more complex if the subject of investigation is reading in L2/FL. Students' repertoire, i.e. knowledge readers draw on while reading, becomes wider; readers employ knowledge and experiences related to both L1 and L2/FL, factors that can either facilitate or hinder the process of L2/FL reading. Below several factors influencing L2/FL reading are discussed.

Linguistic Factors: Knowledge of Grammar, Vocabulary and Discourse Organization

First, let us discuss linguistic factors that influence L2/FL reading. L1 readers have considerable tacit grammar knowledge before they begin to read. They are also equipped with the vocabulary knowledge of approximately 6000 words (estimates for a six-year-old reader). Undoubtedly, this knowledge constitutes an important linguistic resource base for beginner readers (Grabe and Stoller 2002: 43).

L2/FL readers, by contrast, begin to read at the same time that they learn to use the language orally. They lack a repertoire of words that they have learnt in oral contexts and which can be matched with words they encounter in texts. In L2/FL classrooms, students often learn new words

from texts, without developing accurate letter-sound correspondences. Researchers, e.g. Muljani, Koda and Moates (1998: 99), notice that recently more attention is paid to lower-level aspects of reading and word recognition practice is highly recommended as a way to develop automaticity and fluency, which are prerequisites for higher-level reading, i.e. comprehension.

For beginner L2/FL students the reading situation is different than the one for L1 beginner readers. At the beginning of L2/FL instruction, texts are very often used as tasks to teach grammar and vocabulary, not as materials to develop reading skills. If this way of teaching continues, readers may develop a false perception of L2/FL reading, based on the assumption that texts are meant to be studied as a source of new grammar and vocabulary, not to be read as media that communicate ideas. I think this may lead to insufficient reading practice, devoid of strategic teaching, which emphasizes developing an array of reading strategies to be used for different reading purposes.

Another factor facilitating reading in L2/FL is knowledge of discourse organization. It may happen that readers understand most of the vocabulary in a text but they still cannot comprehend the text. "Any sort of systematic attention to clues that reveal how authors attempt to relate ideas to one another or any sort of systematic attempt to impose structure upon a text, especially in some sort of visual representation of the relationships among key ideas, facilitates comprehension as well as both short-term and long-term memory of the text" (Pearson and Fielding 1991: 832). Contrastive rhetoric researchers (e.g. Connor 1996: 113–5) investigate how different languages organize texts and how foreign language readers produce texts. Kaplan (1997: 32) says that contrastive rhetoric "posits that speakers of two different languages will organize the same reality in different ways." This is due to the fact that different languages will provide different language resources to organize text. Grabe and Stoller (2002: 60) point out the following factors that may influence L2 reading comprehension:

1) how texts express interpersonal relations with the reader (e.g. the use of "I" and "you" pronouns);

2) expectations about the amount of information embedded in a text; and

3) assumptions about explicit guidance of reader interpretation, e.g. by means of supporting details.

Pedagogic studies, e.g. Carrell (1985: 741), indicate that sensitizing students to rhetorical organization of texts can facilitate L2/FL reading comprehension.

Metalinguistic and Metacognitive Awareness

As has been mentioned above, learners approach and process L1 texts equipped with a tacit knowledge of their native language. However, due to direct language instruction their knowledge of L2/FL is more explicit. With the recent stress in FL methodology on learner reflection on learning, students develop greater metacognitive awareness of how they learn and what makes their learning successful. Grabe and Stoller (2002: 46) suggest taking advantage of metacognitive abilities students developed in learning a L2/FL to increase their awareness of L1 reading. The researchers claim that it may be more beneficial to increase learners' awareness and practice of strategies that are most useful for students in L1 reading than practicing in L2/FL situations the strategies that students have never used before.

Schoonen, Hulstijn and Bossers (1998: 89) investigated to what extent vocabulary knowledge and metacognitive knowledge account for L1 and L2 reading comprehension. The study demonstrated that vocabulary had a greater influence on L2 reading than on L1 reading, especially at lower levels, whereas metacognitive knowledge was an important factor in both L1 and L2 reading, although making a bigger contribution to reading at higher level of language competence.

There seems to be an interaction between reading in L1 and reading in L2. Salataci and Akyel (2002: 34) examined reading strategies used in L1 (Turkish) and L2 (English) reading. They concluded that the reading strategy instruction in L2 influenced students' use of reading strategies in Turkish and English, implying that the process of transfer is bidirectional.

Linguistic Differences Between Any Two Languages

Linguistic differences between learners' L1 and L2/FL influence word recognition, fluency and reading comprehension. For example, because of L1 orthography readers of Chinese and Japanese make greater use of word processing than do readers of English. The Orthographic Depth Hypothesis, discussed by Koda (1999: 52–3), proposes that word processing while reading depends on letter-sound relationships. Phonologically regular languages, e.g. Polish, are processed in a different way than phonologically irregular languages, e.g. English. It is assumed that in L2/FL reading students will tend to use some L1 processing at least at the beginning of their learning. Thus Polish learners while reading English will approach words in the way they process words in their native language.

Similarly, syntactic and discourse differences may affect word recognition. Bernhardt (qtd. in Grabe 1991: 388) found out that German readers seem to focus more attention on function words than do English readers; while English readers appear to focus more on content words.

L2 Competence

L2 proficiency plays a considerable role in L2/FL reading. The Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis claims that in order to read in a FL/L2, a learner must reach a certain level of target language linguistic ability. The results of reading studies indicate that there is an interdependence between L2 language proficiency and L2 reading abilities, e.g. Devine (1993: 263), Kusiak (2000: 254).

The Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis also concerns the question whether limited proficiency in an L2/FL restricts readers in using very specific types of textual information, such as discourse constraints of a text. Cziko's studies (qtd. in Hudson 1993: 183–4) indicated that the reading performance of the advanced English proficiency French students resembled that of native English speakers; they were more sensitive to syntactic, semantic and discourse constraints in a text, and applied more nontextual information. Low language proficiency readers,

on the other hand, based their reading on bottom-up strategies, e.g. sensitivity to graphic information of a text. On the basis of these results Cziko suggested that L2 reader strategies are related to the level of L2 competence.

Alderson (1984: 20) suggested the modification of the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis. He assumed that inefficient L2/FL reading is due to L1 reading strategies not being activated in L2/FL reading because of poor L2/FL knowledge. The study of Clarke (1993: 119) indicated that there is some transfer of skills but the language of the text "short circuits" the good reading ability, reverting the reader to poor reading strategies.

Researchers have attempted to answer the question: What is the linguistic threshold? Cummins (qtd. in Devine 1993: 266–7) claims that the threshold cannot be defined in absolute terms. It will depend on the kind of a reading task and the reader's level of available and relevant background knowledge. Laufer and Sim (1985: 409) attempted to express the qualities of the linguistic threshold in a numerical manner. In their study they used the reading section of the Cambridge First Certificate of English and their own reading strategy examination. They concluded that the linguistic threshold necessary to read English for Academic Purposes successfully corresponds to 65%–70% score on the Cambridge FCE test. The L2 threshold was characterised by the researchers as knowledge of vocabulary, subject matter, discourse markers, and syntactic structure, in decreasing order of importance.

L1 Reading

The Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis states that L2 reading depends upon the reading abilities in one's L1 rather than upon the learner's level of L2 competence. Coady (1979: 12) asserts that foreign language reading is a reading problem, not a language problem. Therefore, difficulties in L2 reading would be due to lack of the "old" L1 reading skills or failure in transferring L1 reading skills into L2 reading.

Cowan (qtd. in Alderson 1984: 9–10) posited a parallel processing theory of reading, which claims that the strategies readers use are language-specific. Reading difficulties in a FL result from the reader's predictions about syntactic clues which are related to the strategies used

in reading in a native language. Cowan gives an example of English readers reading German, who being used to subject-verb-object order will be confused by German sentences with object-verb-subject order. Alderson (1984: 11) concludes that the "corollary of the parallel processing theory is that the knowledge of the foreign language will affect the development of the foreign language strategies: the less of the foreign language you know, the more likely you are to read as in your first language."

Grabe and Stoller (2002: 56) consider the level of L1 reading abilities crucial. They claim that "students who are weak in L1 literacy abilities cannot be expected to transfer many supporting resources to L2 reading contexts. The types of abilities that students use in their L1 reading represent the upper limit of what can be expected for linguistic transfer, strategic practices, problem-solving experiences, task completion skills and metacognitive awareness of reading processes."

Consolidating the Linguistic Threshold and the Linguistic Interdependence Hypotheses

Bernhardt and Kamil (1995: 31–2) reviewed the studies investigating the contribution of L1 reading and L2 proficiency to L2 reading, and noticed considerable consistency in the amount of variance accounted for by L1 reading (from 20 per cent upwards) and L2 proficiency (from 30 per cent upwards), with L2 proficiency consistently a more powerful predictor. They pointed out that most studies leave 50% of the variance in L2 reading ability unexplained.

Reading studies conducted at the end of the 20th century indicate that both first language reading ability and second language proficiency have significant effects on second language reading ability: e.g. Carrell (1991: 159), Bossers (qtd. in Alderson 2001: 39). An interesting connection between the level of L2 knowledge and L2 reading was observed by Bossers, who found out that L2 knowledge (especially vocabulary knowledge) was strongly related to L2 reading comprehension at lower level of L2 proficiency, whereas only "at a relatively advanced levels of L2 proficiency did first-language reading ability prove to be the sole predictor of second-language reading" (qtd. in Alderson: 2001: 39). Similarly,

Block (1986: 336) observed that proficient L2 readers performed similarly to proficient L1 readers; less proficient L2 readers performed similarly to less proficient L1 readers. She concluded that "strategic resources, thus, seem more important than specific linguistic knowledge for these readers."

Socio-Cultural Differences

L2 readers may hold different assumptions about how to use text resources. As Grabe and Stoller (2002: 60) say, "In each setting, individuals are socialized in their L1 education to engage with texts in specified ways." McCormick (1997: 14), advocating the social-cultural model of reading, recommends treating readers as active producers of meaning, within specific cultural constrains. The researcher described a student who was not able to question her reading process and the text she was reading; she talked as if texts and her process of reading were "straightforward, objective and naturally correct" (McCormick 1997: 109). McCormick claimed that the student's understanding of texts and reading was conditioned by the way the student had been trained.

Teaching Contexts

The example of the student unable to question texts and her reading brings up the last factor in this discussion: expectations of L1 and L2 educational institutions. L2 students' assumptions and behaviours are shaped by both their L1 and L2 institutional experiences. These include a variety of teaching factors, such as teacher behaviour, curricula, class test and national exam requirements. Recently in the USA a lot of attention is given to teaching reading in English to bilingual students who are still in the process of developing English language proficiency (e.g. Cummins 2001). Educators are encouraged to develop in their bilingual students' critical language awareness of both first and second languages and by all means to avoid treating students' L1 abilities as an impediment to learning academic English. Similarly, in the context of teaching reading

in a foreign language more focus is put on raising learners' metalinguistic knowledge of both L1 and a FL and drawing on this knowledge while developing competence in both languages.

Future Research in the Polish Context

Comparing reading in Polish and reading in English as a foreign language seems a challenging task. Research might involve exploring readers' perceptions of reading in L1 and a FL, comparing the two perceptions and the way they interact and influence each other. It would be useful to investigate how L1 and FL educational institutions influence learners' role in reading, e.g. comparing how reading abilities to interpret Polish texts are developed during secondary school education and how reading skills are taught during EFL classes. Educational researchers may examine a washback effect of national exams, e.g. the final secondary school exam, on teaching L1 and FL reading and students' perceptions of reading in the two languages. Both teachers and researchers could benefit from investigating a possibility of transfer of reading strategies between the two languages. They could also compare readers' metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness of Polish with those of a FL and investigate how this awareness influences L1 and FL reading.

Investigating how a reader's first language and culture influence his/her reading in a foreign language will enrich our understanding of the complex nature of reading and raise teacher awareness of a variety of factors that can make pedagogic practices more effective.

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