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## READING IN ENGLISH: CONTRASTING L1 AND L2 CONTEXTS

*Abstract:* The paper presents a literature and research review of reading in English as a first (L1) and a foreign/second language (L2). Similarities and differences existing in the two contexts are described and reading research approaches explained with the aim of determining the issues and questions that connect English L1 reading research with English L2 reading research. It is concluded that there is a significant applicability of L1 reading research approaches in L2 settings owing to a number of reasons, and that studies in both research contexts aim at instructional applicability. In the end, implications for new L2 reading research are suggested.

*Key words:* L1 reading development, L2 reading development, linguistic and processing differences, transfer of reading abilities, L1/L2 reading research.

### INTRODUCTION

In spite of the fact that reading has been the focus of an immense body of research for a century, there is still rather limited knowledge of L2 reading development (Grabe, Stoller 2011: xiv). One of the main reasons lies in the differences between L1 and L2 settings. Much of recent research into L2 reading has focused on determining “the components that contribute to or hinder success in reading“ (Savić 2014: 109), like reading strategies, attitudes, motivation, and a number of contextual factors. Also, in the last few decades, studies have attempted to compare the achievement and performance of L1 and L2 readers, producing conflicting results (Grant, Gottardo, Geva 2011: 67). Still, L2 reading research continues to be based on L1 studies, indicating the applicability of L1 research in the field of L2.

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN L1 AND L2 RESEARCH APPROACHES

Reading is an extremely complex neurolinguistic activity which depends on graphophonic, lexical, syntactic and semantic meaning of the text (Birch 2008; Brewster, Ellis, Girard 2004; Cameron 2008; Crystal 1987; Snow, Burns, Griffin 1998). To be successful, readers must possess knowledge and skills that enable them to “recognise individual letters, know how syllables make individual words, use information from the whole text and the context“ (Cameron 2008: 123). In learning to read in L1 “part of the learning process is to figure out how the writing system encodes the reader’s language“, which makes mapping print to language the fundamental task for any child learning to read (Perfetti, Dunlap 2008: 34).

For skilled readers, reading knowledge and skills operate very quickly in working memory at two levels: lower-level processing (identification) and higher-level processing (interpretation) (Grabe 1991; Grabe 2002; Grabe, Stoller 2011). Lower-level processes refer to lexical access (automatic word recognition), syntactic parsing (extracting grammar information) and semantic proposition formation (building up of semantic information for comprehension), whose activation takes one or two seconds in working memory (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 14). Fluent L1 readers are able to perform the three basic lower-level processes almost automatically, in a couple of seconds: they recognize 98-100 per cent of the words in a text, i.e. four or five words per second, perform syntactic parsing for clause-level meaning very fast without very much conscious attention, and form semantic proposition by combining word meaning into basic clause-level units (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 17-18). Although these processes do not immediately result in comprehension, they are indispensable for reading comprehension: research in L1 settings suggests high correlation between good word recognition skills and reading comprehension, and between syntactic knowledge and reading comprehension, while in L2 settings there is “persuasive observational evidence for the strong relationship between grammar and reading“ (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 17). Rapid and accurate word recognizing ability “has been seen as an important predictor of reading ability, particularly with young readers” (Grabe 1991: 385). Moreover, research suggests that “aspects of syntactic processing are, in relevant sense, reflex-like” and can be explained “in terms of grammar network including neuronal assemblies that act as discrete grammatical sequence detectors” (Pulvermuller, Shytirov, Hastings, Carlyon 2008: 251). However, both L1 and L2 readers “need countless hours of exposure to print (that they are capable of comprehending successfully)“ in order to develop automaticity “in using information from grammatical structures to assist them in reading“ (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 18), and for automatic word recognition (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 15).

Fluent readers use the following six skills and abilities simultaneously and very rapidly, both in L1 and L2: 1. Automatic recognition skills: eight to ten words are accessed every two seconds; 2. Vocabulary and structural knowledge: every two seconds a clause is parsed and a meaning unit is formed; 3. Formal discourse structure knowledge: every two seconds a new meaning unit is connected into the text model; 4. Content/world background knowledge: every two seconds the new information is interpreted according to the purposes, background expectations, feelings and attitudes; 5. Synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies: comprehension is monitored, appropriate inferences are made, and misunderstandings repaired, if needed; 6. Metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring: ambiguities are resolved, difficulties addressed and text information critiqued, if needed (Grabe 1991; Grabe, Stoller 2011). Consequently, to produce fluent L2 readers, L2 instruction should focus on developing knowledge and skills in all areas mentioned above, using three sources of information: visual, phonological and semantic (encoded in letters, words and sentences). From this information they construct a text base as a dynamic and temporary meaning of the text, which they then integrate using their background knowledge (Cameron 2008: 127-136).

However, learning to read in L2 has many specific features, some of them resulting from “the impact of transfer at various ability levels, on various processes” with which L2 learners have to deal (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 35). In learning to read in English as L2 “an especially important set of questions concerns the effect of L1”, especially the possibility of transferring the “mapping principles learned as part of L1 reading” to reading in English (Perfetti, Dunlap 2008: 35). Grabe and Stoller (2011) argue that “the L2 reader learns to read in the L2 with a two-language processing system”, which means that L2 reading is supported by both languages because “the L1 never completely turns off” (p. 35). The authors have found fourteen differences between L1 and L2 reading development and grouped them into three areas: 1. linguistic and processing differences; 2. individual and experiential differences; 3. socio-cultural and institutional differences (p. 35). The first group of differences is the most complex one, as it refers to differences in vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and orthography, as well as to readers’ metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness, and to two languages transfer influences. The second group relates to differences in individual reading abilities, motivation for reading, exposure to reading and text types and language resources available to readers in L1 and L2. The third group concerns differences in socio-cultural backgrounds, ways of organising texts and expectations of educational institutions.

Linguistic and processing differences between L1 and L2 readers have been studied a lot, and consequently, the research in this area has contributed to understanding many of the aspects of reading. The major difference between L1 and L2 reading is the fact that in L2 reading follows a long period (at least four or five years) of oral language development: with English as L1, reading starts

formally at the age of five in Great Britain, at the age of six in the United States of America, Canada and Australia (Grabe, Stoller 2011; Westwood 2008). At the age children start learning to read in English as L1, they already possess an extensive vocabulary (5000 to 7000 words) and good knowledge of basic grammatical structures (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 36). On the contrary, young L2 learners of English as a foreign language (in foreign language contexts like the Serbian one) have a very limited knowledge of vocabulary and grammar when they begin to read in English: after two years of oral language development in Grade One and Grade Two in the course of two 45-minute lessons a week, they start the reading programme in Grade Three and are supposed to read not only texts containing familiar vocabulary and structures, but are also expected to learn new language through reading, not being able to “match the sounded-out word to a word that they know orally because they do not yet know the word orally” (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 37). Moreover, L2 learners also need a better foundation of structural and discourse knowledge to be able to read texts in English effectively, but research has not yet offered specific suggestions related to foundation of grammatical and text organisation knowledge necessary for L2 reading comprehension (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 37). Also, there are opposing views as well: Urquhart and Weir (1998) point to fact that for L1 learner in the early stages “listening and learning through listening would normally precede reading“, but later “a great deal of language learning – lexis, synthax, rhetorical organisation – would be accomplished via reading“; on the contrary, “an L2 course would not necessarily need to be preceded by an oral course [and] [a] ’reading to learn language’ stage would precede ’reading to learn’ stage“ (p. 24).

Metalinguistic awareness, i.e. knowledge of how language functions, and metacognitive knowledge, i.e. knowledge of what one knows, of L2 readers is usually larger than the awareness of L1 readers. Vygotsky (1986) stressed this difference:

The child’s strong points in a foreign language are his weak points in his native language, and vice versa. In his own language, the child conjugates and declines correctly, but without realizing it. He cannot tell the gender, the case, or the tense of the word he is using. In a foreign language, he distinguishes between masculine and feminine genders and is conscious of grammatical forms from the beginning. (p. 195)

As a rule, L2 learners are often in the position to discuss vocabulary and grammar of L2 and also to reflect on their own learning happening while reading in L2; moreover, they usually begin to read in L2 after they have already mastered reading in their L1, and can respond favourably to explicit teaching of strategies that could enhance their reading comprehension in L2 (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 39). Metacognitive knowledge is found to account “for more than 25 per cent of the variance in reading comprehension, with reading self-concept (motivation) add-

ing an additional 5 per cent” (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 39). Serbian young learners start learning to read in English as a foreign language after they have mastered reading in Serbian in both scripts (Cyrillic and Roman) and learned the sentence structure and basic grammar, as well as metalanguage used to describe these aspects of their L1.

The influence of linguistic differences between L1 and L2 on L2 reading comprehension, with English as L2, depends a lot on the readers’ L1. Orthographies can be more or less transparent in different L1s and readers read more easily if the relationship between letters and sounds is more transparent, finding no difficulty in activating the appropriate sounds related to letters: Serbian is fully transparent and 30 letters of the language have exactly 30 corresponding sounds. On the other hand, English is very opaque for an alphabetic language: it has 26 letters and 44 sounds, with more or less inconsistent grapheme-phoneme correspondences and with most letters having “multiple possible pronunciations depending on the word context”, like the letter ‘g’ which “has at least three different sounds (e.g. in ‘garage’ or ‘giraffe’ or ‘thing’) or can be silent (e.g. ‘gnome’)” (Perfetti, Dunlap 2008: 25).

There is research evidence that “readers process words differently in transparent and opaque orthographies” and that “the orthography of a student’s L1 will influence L2 reading development even among advanced L2 readers” (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 41-42). Perfetti and Dunlap (2008) argue that “in the case of orthography, it appears that there can be significant effects on learning to read” (p. 18). The authors’ orthographic depth hypothesis explains how the orthographic depth influences the strategies readers use while reading:

The more shallow or transparent the orthography – that is, the more reliable the correspondences between graphemes and speech segments – the more the reader uses a print-to-sound decoding strategy. The deeper or less transparent the orthography, the more the reader uses a direct look-up the word, without grapheme-speech decoding” (p. 18).

Since in English there is less mapping at grapheme-phoneme level, but higher consistency at the level of the rime (consisting of the vowel and the consonant ending of a syllable), Perfetti and Dunlap (2008) contend that readers of English may not decode letter-by-letter, but may rather use “a larger portion, or “grain size”, of the printed word to map onto spoken language” (p. 19), while “decoding letters to phonemes is more adaptive in a shallow orthography” (p. 26).

Taking into account differences in orthography between Serbian and English, Serbian learners beginning to read in English will probably experience both positive and negative transfer of their L1 reading ability in this respect: the English alphabet will be mostly familiar, as 23 letters of the English alphabet are already used in Serbian, and are formally introduced and practised in reading L1 texts in Grade Two curriculum of the Serbian language; however, automatic

application of ‘1 grapheme = 1 phoneme’ correspondence in Serbian will make it difficult for children to read the words in English where such correspondence cannot be applied; moreover the analytical-synthetical approach, i.e. letter-by-letter reading, which is used in learning to read in Serbian “can make knowledge, skills and strategies used in reading in Serbian ineffective when reading in English” (Savić 2012: 311). A special challenge is posed by the complex system of English vowels, “as the Serbian vowel system consists of five vowels only, while English has twelve pure vowels and eight diphthongs” (Savić, Paunović, Stojanović 2007: 44), most of whom differ in quality from the Serbian ones, so that a lot of practice is needed to master them.

Both in L1 and L2 automaticity of word recognition was regarded as a prerequisite for “higher level processing of meaning across phrases, sentences, paragraphs and whole texts” (Macaro, Erler 2008: 92). What is more, the distinction between bottom-up processes, involving decoding the text word by word and clause by clause, and top-down processes, which implied elaboration of the text in the reader’s mind and extracting the meaning from the reader’s own schemata, was transferred to L2 reading and later led to the models of reading that saw reading comprehension as a result of applying combinations of both processes; schemata can play a very important role in reading comprehension and should be understood as a concept of personal prior knowledge interacting with knowledge of the topic of the text and specific knowledge (Macaro, Erler 2008: 93).

## APPLICABILITY OF L1 RESEARCH FINDINGS ON L2 CONTEXTS

Although L1 and L2 reading contexts differ in many aspects, Grabe and Stoller (2011) contend that L1 reading research can offer studies on L2 reading development the right direction for several reasons:

First, far more research has been carried out on reading in L1 contexts (especially in English as an L1) than in L2 contexts. Second, students learning to become readers in L1 contexts usually achieve a reasonable level of fluency in reading comprehension abilities, but the same claim cannot be made for students learning to read in L2 contexts. Third, the ability to draw implications for instruction from research – including training studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of numerous instructional techniques and practices – is much more developed in L1 contexts than it is in L2 contexts. Fourth, reading instruction in L1 contexts has been a source of many instructional innovations that have not yet been explored extensively in L2 contexts, either at the level of research or at the level of practical implementation. (p. 4)

Consequently, English L1 reading research gives a much more complete picture of reading development, especially of fluent reading comprehension. In

L1 contexts, studies have been rather extensive, tackling a variety of learners' ages, from early childhood to university level, and focusing on different aspects of reading ability, from word recognition and vocabulary development, through comprehension and discourse organisation, to reading strategies and reading fluency (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 34). Research results into L1 reading have highlighted important issues, shed more light on reading development and reading skills, and provided significant knowledge that can promote both L1 and L2 reading instruction.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

There are significant research implications stemming from the above discussion of three groups of differences in L1 and L2 reading development. As “current L2 research suggests that the L2 reader is one who incorporates both L1 and L2 language and literacy knowledge”, research of L2 reading comprehension should inevitably explore “L2 reading processes, the role of L1 transfer, the development and use of the bilingual lexicon, and the strengthening impact of L2 input knowledge as the L2 reader develops” ” (Grabe, Stoller 2011: 56). Moreover, it must be taken into account that there is a two-way transfer, as Vygotsky (1986) stated quite explicitly:

Success in learning a foreign language is contingent on a certain degree of maturity in the native language. The child can transfer to the new language the system of meanings he already possesses in his own. The reverse is also true - a foreign language facilitates mastering the higher forms of the native language. The child learns to see his language as one particular system among many, to view its phenomena under more general categories, and this leads to awareness of his linguistic operations. (pp. 195–196)

New research should allow “comparison of L2 outcomes across contexts” and thus help identify the variables significant for predicting success in L2 reading (Murphy 2014: x). A possible way to build new knowledge is to replicate L1 and L2 reading research studies in different contexts.

## CONCLUSION

The comparison of L1 and L2 reading research has indicated the areas of mutual interest in the two fields, but the emphasis in L2 studies of reading development reflect the peculiarities of L2 reading research issues, i.e. factors affecting reading success. It can be concluded from the above survey of recent reading research that a variety of variables interact with both L1 and L2 reading development, and that more research is needed for a deeper and more comprehensive understand-

ing of the area. Considering the growing importance of reading in English, the main purpose of all reading research should inevitably be instructional applicability, i.e. improvement of reading in English both as L1 and L2.

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## ЧИТАЊЕ НА ЕНГЛЕСКОМ: КОНТРАСТИРАЊЕ L1 И L2 КОНТЕКСТА

*Резиме:* У раду је дат преглед литературе и истраживања вештине читања на енглеском као матерњем језику (L1) и на енглеском као страном/другом језику (L2). Описане су сличности и разлике које се јављају у ова два истраживачка контекста и утврђена питања која повезују L1 и L2 истраживања, како би се објаснила апликабилност истраживања читања у L1 контексту на L2 контекст.

Упркос чињеници да се вештина читања истражује дуже од једног века, још увек се не зна много о развоју вештине читања на страном/другом језику. Главни разлог за то јесу бројне разлике које постоје између L1 и L2 контекста. Међутим, сличности у развоју вештине читања у оба контекста се не могу оспорити; у оба контекста, течно читање подразумева истовремену и веома брзу примену шест вештина које омогућавају препознавање речи, утврђивање значења реченичких целина на основу граматичке анализе, формирање значењског модела текста, разумевање текста у односу на претходно знање о теми текста, синтезу и евалуацију идеја у тексту и контролу разумевања, и најзад, примену метакогнитивних знања и вештина како би се разрешиле недоумице и тешкоће у разумевању. Истраживања читања на енглеском језику у L1 контексту утврдила су високу корелацију између вештине препознавања речи и разумевања текста, као и између познавања граматике и разумевања текста, док се у L2 контексту може рећи да је брзина и тачност препознавања речи значајан предиктор вештине читања, као и да знање граматике значајно утиче на вештину читања.

С друге стране, бројне разлике у L1 и L2 контекстима утичу на особености истраживања у L2 контексту. Најсложеније су лингвистичке разлике (у ортографији, лексици, граматици, дискурсу, и неопходним металингвистичким и метакогнитивним способностима), затим индивидуалне и социокултурне. Ипак, истраживање читања у L2 контексту и даље се ослања на истраживања читања на енглеском језику у L1 контексту, како због много већег броја истраживања у L1 контексту, тако и због веће могућности примене резултата у настави читања.

У раду се закључује да се истраживање читања на енглеском језику у L1 контексту може применити и на L2 контекст, као и да истраживања читања у оба контекста имају значајне импликације за наставу читања на енглеском језику и у L1 и у L2 контексту.

*Кључне речи:* развој вештине читања на енглеском као матерњем језику (L1), развој вештине читања на енглеском као страном/другом језику (L2), лингвистичке разлике, трансфер вештине читања, истраживање читања у L1 и L2 контексту.