

The Unbearable Opacity of Reading

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Nolan Weil—Utah State University

[An extensive paper based on this presentation has been accepted for publication in the Asian EFL Journal. It should appear in December or January under the title: *Vocabulary Size, Background Characteristics, and Reading Skill of Korean Intensive English Students*. The author would encourage anyone interested in a more detailed account to watch for it. The Asian EFL Journal can be accessed at <http://www.asian-e-fl-journal.com/>]

Introduction

The unbearable opacity of reading is a whimsical way of calling attention to the fact that when a reading teacher asks students to engage in silent reading in class, it is nearly impossible to observe what they actually do because the process of reading is not publicly observable.

Characterization of the author's reading class in terms of focus on activities (Level 3 in a 4-level IEP: After exiting from Level 4, students are eligible to register for regular university classes.)

- √√√ time spent in class reading
- √√√ post reading small group discussion
- √√ vocabulary building
- √ increasing word knowledge (e.g., affixes, roots)
- √? syntactic knowledge (explicit focus light)
- √ discourse processing (organization cues: temporal, additive, causal, adversative)
- √√ text structure (headings, graphic depiction: e.g., topic-subtopic, cause/effect, time order...)
- √√ background knowledge (cultural frames, general education)

√ = estimate of degree of time/emphasis on each aspect over 1-2 week period

Theoretical Underpinnings

Reading is an incredibly complex cognitive-linguistic activity. Among the theoretically distinct but empirically separable components of reading are:

- word recognition (decoding: involves orthographic & phonological processing and semantic access)
- vocabulary knowledge *
- word knowledge (intraword awareness, morphological knowledge...)
- syntactic processing
- discourse processing
- knowledge of text structure
- strategic action (supports comprehension, including when reader must compensate for limitations in other components, e.g., inadequate vocabulary) *

* = particularly emphasized in this research

The Study

Eleven Korean students from the presenter's reading course in USU's Intensive English program and five Korean undergraduate students participated in the study. The study examined the relationship between breadth of vocabulary, previous EFL study and performance in the reading of an academic text. The author used the Swansea Levels Tests to estimate vocabulary sizes and collected information on background characteristics via questionnaire. The students were trained to think-aloud during reading.

They then read a 960-word text and thought aloud (in Korean or English) as they attempted to work out the meaning of the text. Their performances were video-recorded and their verbal reports were transcribed and analyzed.

Result Summary

Students with more total hours of high school English instruction tended to score higher on the vocabulary measure, and students with more vocabulary tended to process the text more quickly and rely less on a dictionary. However, students with larger vocabularies did not always appear to be the more skillful readers. The author found some evidence that the better readers demonstrated superior syntactic knowledge that enabled them to rely more on the text and less on compensatory strategies.

Background Literature: A short list

Bernhardt, E. B. (2005). Progress and procrastination in second language reading. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 25, 133-150.

In addition to a broad overview of changes in the landscape of reading research since the 1970s, Bernhardt advocates a compensatory model of second language reading. The model rests on research suggesting that L1 reading proficiency accounts for up to 20% of the variance in L2 reading comprehension. L2 language knowledge (principally lexical and syntactic) accounts for 30% leaving 50% unexplained.

Carrell, P. Devine, J. & D. Eskey, D. (1988). *Interactive approaches to second language reading*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Various treatments of the generally agreed upon contemporary view that skillful reading is a complex process in which comprehension results from the integration of bottom up, data driven processes and top down, knowledge based processes although just how this works is not well understood.

Grabe, W. & Stoller, F. L. (2002). *Teaching and researching reading*. New York: Longman.

Current research and theory of reading, especially aimed at practitioners. The authors encourage teachers to come to their own conclusions about the second language reading process and to investigate the reading behaviors of their own students.

Grabe, W. (2004). Research on teaching reading. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24, 44-69.

A review drawing on both L1 and L2 research is used to develop a set of 10 instructional implications for second language reading.

Koda, K. (2005). *Insights into second language reading: A cross-linguistic approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Synthesis of a large body of work on the many component processes comprising skilled reading with a particular emphasis on integrating findings on how L1 literacy influences L2 reading.

Laufer, B. (1997). The lexical plight in second language reading. In J. Coady and T. Huckin (Eds.), *Second language vocabulary acquisition* (pp. 20-34). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Highlights the critical role of vocabulary in second language reading. Argues that students whose vocabularies do not meet a certain minimum threshold are unlikely to be able to read with a high degree of fluency or comprehension.

Pressley, M. & Afflerbach, P. (1995). *Verbal protocols of reading: The nature of constructively responsive reading*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

A detailed treatment of the tremendous range of strategic activities that good readers typically engage in before, during, and after reading in order to facilitate optimal comprehension.