WHEN TO TEACH L2 READING TO YOUNG LEARNERS: GENERAL GUIDELINES TO A SEQUENCE OF INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper has two main aims. First, it will clarify some common misconceptions regarding the teaching of reading to young learners in a second language, and second, it will describe some general guidelines that can be followed when implementing a second language reading program. Because reading is a two-step process that involves decoding and then comprehension, second-language reading instruction should not begin until the learners have the appropriate foundation. This paper will describe that foundation in terms of when reading in a second language should begin, how to prepare young learners for the reading program, the importance of building lexical resources, balancing phonics and sight word instructions, and the value of using engaging and comprehensible texts.

KEYWORDS: young learners, second language reading, instruction sequence, phonics, sight words, reading comprehension, decoding

INTRODUCTION

Parents, teachers, and other educators often have strong beliefs about when and how to teach reading to young learners. This is true about learning to read in one's first language, and it is also true about learning to read in one's second language. One common belief with children learning a second language is that earlier is always better, and this is simply not true when it comes to reading in a second language. Other common misconceptions about learning to read in a second language are that first-language reading skills will interfere with learning how to read in a second language, that grammar instruction is an important component of reading instruction, and that reading instruction must always begin with simplified and easy texts. None of these beliefs is true, so when, how, and in what sequences should second language reading be taught to young learners?

Before we answer that question, it is important to realize that reading is a two-step process. First, the reader needs to decode the symbols that make up the words of the text, and then the reader needs to comprehend the words that he or she has decoded. When readers learn to read in their first language, they usually have lexical resources that are quite considerable. This is less true of learners who are learning to read in their second language. As Koda (2004) and Verhoeven (20011) have noted, learning to read in a second language is both complex and multidimensional because it involves by

definition two or more languages, and for this reason, it is essential to consider the interplay between language and literacy development in both the first and second languages. Although there is no formula that teachers can readily apply in the classroom to start the process of learning to read in a second language, there are some basic guidelines that should be followed.

Decoding, Comprehension, and Reading Competence

As I noted above, reading is a two-step process that involves both decoding and comprehension. Decoding focuses on the mechanics of reading; that is, it emphasizes letter recognition, letter, and sound correspondence, and the words that the symbols make. This step sees reading as a bottom-up process, where readers start with the smallest units of language and combine them to make meaning. Consequently, decoding is associated with reading fluency. Reading fluency refers specifically to the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with appropriate expression when something is read aloud. The second step of the reading process, on the other hand, is comprehension, which is often associated with the terms reading competence or reading ability (Koda, 2004). These terms refer to the learner's capacity to understand and make meaning from written texts. This obviously includes the learner's ability to decode what is written, but it also involves vocabulary knowledge and critical thinking. Thus, the underlying assumption about successful reading comprehension is that it involves a reader who can combine textual information with existing background knowledge to understand the written message. In other words, reading competence and reading ability encompass a broad range of skills and knowledge that enables a reader to effectively engage with and understand a text.

L2 Reading Readiness

Learning to read in a second language should not begin until the child is already reading in their first language. This is supported by research. Cummins (1981) described the Interdependence Hypothesis and provided evidence that showed that literacy skills transfer from the first language (L1) to the second language (L2). Koda's research (2004) also supports the idea that L1 literacy skills transfer to L2 literacy skills because in her study she found that L1 literacy skills helped young children with L2 reading comprehension. Additionally, research by August & Shanahan (2006) has shown that children with strong literacy skills in their first language tend to have better academic outcomes overall. This includes learning outcomes in their second language. The research concluded that reading skills in the first language can support the development of skills in the second language, such as the acquisition of vocabulary and the development of strategies for comprehension. In conclusion, children should first learn to read in their first language before learning to read in a second language because having strong literacy skills in one's first language provides the foundation for learning to read in a second language.

Another important guideline when developing a second language reading program for young learners is that listening skills transfer to reading skills. For example, research by Rost (1990) found that students who received extensive listening practice in English as a second language saw an increase in reading comprehension to a greater degree than students who only received extensive reading

practice. In addition, Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) conducted a study with ESL university students and found that their listening comprehension skills predicted their reading comprehension skills, even after controlling for vocabulary knowledge and general English proficiency. Finally, Lervåg et al. (2017) looked at the relationship between decoding, component language skills, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension and found listening skills transfer to reading skills "because listening comprehension and decoding skills, together with their interaction, explained almost all of the variance in reading comprehension at the beginning of the study" (13). What this research shows is that, in general, listening skills transfer to reading skills because they are both receptive skills that involve the comprehension of language input. Furthermore, the research suggests that some of the cognitive processes involved in listening and reading may be similar. Therefore, developing listening skills is an important first step before starting a reading program with young learners.

Another reason for developing a child's listening skills before initiating a reading program is to provide the lexical resources that the learners will need to complete the two-step process of reading. If a child uses his or her knowledge of phonics to decode the word he or she has read but does not know the meaning of that word, then the task of reading has not been completed successfully. Reading is more than just decoding; it is also comprehension. Obviously, this means that vocabulary plays a crucial role in second language reading proficiency; this is because, without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, comprehension of texts can be challenging or even impossible.

Since vocabulary knowledge is so crucial, a reading program should not begin until the learners have attained a certain threshold vocabulary level. For example, a review of the literature by Nation and Waring (1997) concluded that learners need to know between 95% and 98% of the words in a text to be able to comprehend it. This suggests that learners must have a significant amount of vocabulary knowledge in order to read and comprehend texts in a second language. Another study by Hancin-Bhatt and Nagy (1994) examined the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension in a group of intermediate ESL learners. The study found that learners with a vocabulary size of around 2,000-3,000-word families were able to comprehend most written texts at their level of proficiency. Finally, Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) examined the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension in a group of advanced EFL learners. The study found that learners with a vocabulary size of around 8,000-word families (as measured by the Vocabulary Levels Test: Nation, 1983, 1990) were able to comprehend most authentic texts. Below this threshold, comprehension was significantly reduced. Overall, this research suggests that the relationship between reading comprehension and lexical knowledge is essential, so teachers need to help learners improve this language aspect by explicitly teaching vocabulary and providing opportunities for learners to build their lexical knowledge through listening activities before they start a reading program.

Phonics

Phonics is the knowledge that is essential to reading. Phonics emphasizes the relationship between sounds and letters, and how to use that relationship to read and write words. It involves teaching learners to identify and manipulate the individual sounds (phonemes) of spoken words, and then to use that knowledge to decode written words (Ehri, 2005). Consequently, the transition from listening to reading with young learners involves easing the learners into this new skill. One way to manage this transition is not to overwhelm young learners with new vocabulary. Phonics instruction should focus on decoding the words that they already know, and new vocabulary should be limited to a range of six to ten new words per class.

There are three main reasons why limiting new vocabulary when teaching phonics is important. The first is cognitive load, which refers to the amount of mental effort required to complete a learning task. In language teaching, cognitive load theory suggests that learners have a limited capacity for processing information and that the cognitive demands of a task should be carefully managed to ensure that learning is effective (Sweller, Ayres, & Kalyuga, 2011). Since learning phonics in a second language can be challenging for young learners, limiting the number of new words assures that we do not overload the student's working memory. Thus, we enable the learners to focus on the primary task; that is, learning the relationship between letters and sounds (e.g., Kalyuga, Ayres, Chandler, & Sweller, 2003). A second reason for limiting new vocabulary when teaching phonics has to do with context. New vocabulary is best learned in a clear context of use, and phonics exercises rarely provide the depth of context needed for retention. As Nation (2001) has noted, students have difficulty retaining new vocabulary in their long-term memory if they do not encounter new words in meaningful contexts that allow them to connect the new word to its meaning and use, and phonics exercises do not provide the context that a child needs to sufficiently learn the new word, and this will limit their ability to apply this knowledge to future texts. Time constraints are the final reason for limiting the teaching of new vocabulary during phonics instruction. Teachers simply have a limited amount of class time, so teaching phonics with already known words saves time because learning new vocabulary takes time and requires task-induced involvement with the meaning and use of the word, which phonics exercises do not provide (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001).

Phonics, although important for basic reading skills, should be combined with other methods and approaches when transitioning from English listening to English reading instruction. Phonics should be used in conjunction with sight word recognition and whole language approaches. This is because English is generally considered to have a relatively poor sound-letter correspondence compared to some other languages, meaning that the relationship between the written letters and the sounds they represent is often inconsistent and unpredictable. Studies have shown that the consistency of the orthography and the kind of writing system may influence the way that children learn to process written language (c.f. Bolger et al., 2005; Carreiras et al., 2009; Paulesu et al., 2000; Siok et al., 2003; Suh et al., 2007; Yoon et al., 2005 among others). For example, the brains of Korean and Spanish first-language readers may be somewhat dissimilar to the brains of English and Chinese first-

language readers because Korean and Spanish have relatively strong sound-letter correspondence, whereas English has poor sound-letter correspondence and Chinese is a logographic writing system. Specifically, the studies found that Korean readers showed more activation in the right hemisphere of the brain, while Chinese and English readers showed more activation in the left hemisphere of the brain. Meanwhile, Spanish readers showed greater activation in brain regions involved in semantic and syntactic processing compared to English readers. To summarize, the brains of English readers are more similar to the brains of Chinese readers, and Chinese does not use a letter-based system of writing, so learning to read in English is more than just learning the phonics.

Sight Words

According to August & Shanahan (2006), the amount of time spent on phonics versus time spent on sight words in second language reading instruction for young learners may depend on a variety of factors, including the learners' age, language background, and proficiency level, as well as the specific reading materials and instructional goals. Needless to say, research suggests that an approach that combines both phonics and sight word instruction is most effective for second-language reading development in young learners. Moreover, providing learners with a balance of phonics and sight word instruction can help them develop a more extensive and interconnected word knowledge base, as well as an understanding of how words work in context (Grabe & Stoller, 2011).

Sight words are words that are frequently encountered in written English and that are typically memorized as whole units by sight, rather than being sounded out using phonics rules. These words often do not follow regular phonics patterns, and they are commonly used in both spoken and written language (Ehri, 2005). Examples of common English sight words include: "is," "the," "do," "of," "to," and "was." These words are important because they make up a large portion of the words that learners encounter in written English. As Nation (2001) observed, depending on the text, a relatively small number of high-frequency sight words account for a significant proportion of the words used in many written texts. For example, Nation and Waring (1997) found that the 2,000 most frequent words in English account for approximately 80% of the words in a typical text. Therefore, because sight words are often not decodable using phonics rules and research has shown that learners who have a solid foundation of sight word recognition are better able to read fluently, and efficiently, and comprehend written texts more effectively, it is important for learners of English as a second language to develop a solid foundation of sight word recognition as part of their early reading instruction.

Engaging & Comprehensible Texts

The final guideline to follow when designing a reading program for young learners is to use both engaging and comprehensible texts. There are several reasons for doing this. First, using engaging texts that are comprehensible to the learners promotes motivation and interest. According to research, when learners are interested in the topic or find the text enjoyable, their motivation to read increases, and this leads to better reading performance (Krashen, 2004). The next reason for using engaging

texts that are comprehensible is because it promotes understanding of the text. Simply put, young learners are more likely to enjoy reading and continue to engage with the language if the text they are reading is comprehensible (Nation and Waring, 1997). Another important reason for using texts that are engaging and comprehensible is that they will promote the acquisition of vocabulary. As Mason & Krashen (1997) have noted, texts that learners enjoy help them to acquire new words in context, leading to better vocabulary retention. Finally, using engaging and comprehensible texts helps to balance the academic and emotional needs of young learners. This is because they are more likely to feel positive emotions such as enjoyment and curiosity. These positive emotions tend to enhance a learner's motivation and reduce negative emotions such as anxiety and boredom (Dörnyei, 2001). Moreover, reading engaging and comprehensible texts helps young learners to feel a sense of connection with the language and the culture, leading to positive affective experiences and increased motivation to learn (Kachru, 1986). In summary, using engaging, comprehensible texts is essential when teaching second language reading to young learners, as it promotes motivation and interest, enhances comprehension, aids in vocabulary acquisition, and balances learners' emotional and academic needs.

CONCLUSION

This paper has clarified some misconceptions about second language reading and presented some guidelines for developing a young learner's second language reading program. Although the reading program that is actually implemented will depend on a variety of factors such as the learners' age, language background, proficiency level, and instructional goals, the guidelines described above will help young learners develop their ability to read. First, it follows a research-supported progression of difficulty. Second, it focuses on building basic cognitive processes for second language comprehension through listening. Moreover, this initial listening program will help learners to attain the threshold vocabulary level that they need and will help to build their general background knowledge. Listening, of course, will give way to reading using a balanced approach that develops both phonics and sight word recognition. To promote the learning of these basic decoding skills, it is recommended that instruction recycles engaging and comprehensible texts from the listening program. The recycling of known stories will help build learners' confidence as readers.

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