# READING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE: A READING PROBLEM OR A LANGUAGE PROBLEM?

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This papers addresses an on-going debate about whether reading in a second language is different than reading in the first language. The focus here centers on a student population such as the one at the University of Arizona, specifically adult L2 readers who are literate in their native language. After reviewing the relevant literature, I examine recent case studies that illustrate the varying degrees to which readers are able to access their L1 knowledge when reading in a second language, touching on issues such as reading strategies, language use, metalinguistic knowledge, the ways in which the L1 influences L2, and biliteracy. I conclude by discussing implications for instruction.

## INTRODUCTION

As the population of the United States becomes more and more diversified ethnically and racially, educators' concerns for addressing the needs of second language learners have also increased. With this has come a renewed interest in second language reading processes. Reading, whether in the first, second, or additional language, is a highly complex process. Although some reading processes are believed to be universal (Goodman, 1971), reading in a second language may place additional demands on the reader due to L2 language and cultural proficiency as well as previous literacy experiences and beliefs. Initially, researchers looked to cognitive psychology and L1 models of reading to understand L2 reading. Models ranging from bottom-up (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974), top-down (McConkie & Rayner, 1976), interactive (Marslen-Wilson, 1975; Rumelhart, 1977; Dell, 1990) and compensatory approaches (Stanovich, 1980) to reading comprehension have been proposed. However, since these models are based on native language (L1) reading studies, the extent to which they are able to accurately describe second language reading processes is less well know. Further, these models of reading tend to view reading as a passive process, a series of skills acquired as an extension of oral language development.

Psycholinguistic (K. Goodman, 1967, 1982) and schema-driven (Rumelhart, 1984) models of reading, on the other hand, posit that reading is an active process of meaning construction between the reader, writer, and text. According to K. Goodman (1967), readers construct meaning from a text by sampling from syntactic, semantic, graphophonic, and pragmatic cues systems in a recursive, variable fashion that uses the least amount of information necessary in order to comprehend the text. Schema-driven models of reading complement this view by asserting that the readers' background knowledge of the topic, text, and context affects their reading process and comprehension. K. Goodman (1996) explains how writers produce one text based on their knowledge of and beliefs about the topic and intended audience while readers perceive and read a different but parallel "personal text" based on their own beliefs and expectations. "There can never be total agreement between reader and writer about the meaning of the text" (p. 52).

L2 reading researchers (Coady, 1979; Jolly, 1978; Rigg, 1977) have applied and built upon these L1 reading models in L2 contexts, supporting K. Goodman's (1971) contention that L1 and L2 reading involve similar processes. L2 reading researchers have also begun to

consider nonlinguistic factors in reading such as the influences of the reader's perceptions of reading in the L1 and L2, as well as of himself or herself as a reader (Carrell, 1987; Devine, 1984; Jung, 1992; Rigg 1977). These researchers suggest that if L2 readers perceive L1 and L2 reading differently, then they are likely to employ different strategies, though not necessarily different processes, in reading each language. Jung (1992) explains that if readers perceive L2 reading as a meaning-making process, then they will be more likely to take an active role in the process and apply whatever strategies and resources that they have available to them in the reading process (e.g. text, context, pragmatic cues and schema). If, on the other hand, readers perceive L2 reading as a process of decoding in which the meaning is derived from a sequential analysis of smaller units of text, then the readers will set about analyzing those parts to the extent that their L2 knowledge and proficiency allows them.

Another complicating factor in understanding L2 reading is deciding the degree to which L1 reading processes and strategies transfer to the L2. As mentioned earlier, K. Goodman (1971, 1973, 1982, 1996) has argued over the years that some aspects of the reading process are universal. Building on Chomsky's (1959), Halliday & Hasan's (1976), and Halliday's (1985) theories on universal lexico-grammatical structures, Goodman claims that some physiological, psychological, and strategic processes in reading are common to all human beings (with the possible exception of those with physical disabilities such as brain damage or blindness):

> I believe the movement in reading through optical, perceptual, syntactic, and semantic cycles is universal in reading all languages regardless of the orthographies they employ. The use of sampling, predicting, confirming and correction strategies is also universal in all forms of reading. (K. Goodman, 1982, p. 74)

From this perspective, readers should profitably be able to transfer L1 reading proficiencies to the L2. However, some researchers (Alderson, 1984; Grabe, 1986) have questioned this hypothesis, arguing that if readers use syntactic cues to predict text patterns and structures, then a reader's predictions of L2 text patterns based on L1 grammar may lead them astray. Grabe (1986) states the problem this way: "While Goodman and others suggest that the fluent reading process may be the same across languages, such a claim does not guarantee transfer of native language reading skills to L2 reading tasks" (p. 37). Although there is room for speculation on this point,[1] the following examples may help shed some light on this question.

## IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

### *Case Study of Mario*

In Spring 1998, I began working closely with several proficient adult ESL readers who had enrolled in a literature-based ESL composition class (English 108) I was teaching at the University of Arizona. One reader in particular, Mario, caught my attention because of his unqualified love of learning. Mario actively followed his imagination wherever it led him, picking up a book, dance-step, or circuit-board with equal alacrity. His natural curiosity led him to volunteer for a study investigating the use of retrospective miscue analysis with proficient ESL readers, and ultimately made him an excellent research subject; his L1

background in Spanish also provided an interesting contrast to other readers in the study with Asian L1 backgrounds.

Retrospective miscue analysis is an instructional strategy that aims to heighten a reader's awareness of the reading process by recording him or her reading out loud, and then later involving the reader in a discussion of recorded reading, noting places where the observed response (i.e., what the reader actually said) varied from the expected response based on what was printed in the text. Each deviation from the printed text is called a miscue and can reveal the ways in which readers interact with a text. By engaging readers in the process of analyzing their own miscues, teacher-researchers attempt to make the readers more cognizant of their own reading strategies, building on their strengths as readers while also dispelling any misconceptions about the reading process in general. The procedure used with Mario was typical in that it involved a series of sessions in which he read and retold a story out loud while being recorded on cassette. In later sessions, we would listen to the recording and discussed selected miscues.

The first story Mario read and discussed with me was "Floating" by Brennan (1991). One passage in the text referred to *spaghetti verdi* and another to "tiny white blossoms" (p. 235). In his oral reading and retelling, Mario pronounced these as "spaghetti verday" and "blussums." I asked about the meaning of these words. The transcript raises issues about a proficient L2 reader's access to L1 knowledge:[2]

> Tape: (...) tiny white $blussums.
>
> Adrian: What's going on there?
>
> Mario: Mmm. Y'know cherry blossom, right I don't know if I say it right in English, but in Spanish there's (...) exactly the same (...) linking. I don't know about in Mexico or somewhere else, they might have it, but in Venezuela we have cherry blossoms. And that's how we say it, cherry blossom. Maybe I read that and thought, "I think this is how you say this word," but I wasn't sure.
>
> Adrian: O.K., so the "$blussums" are the "blossoms"?
>
> Mario: (Laughs) Yeah. Well, maybe I have this concept. I was going to say that too. Sometimes, for example, I read "spaghetti verday." It's not spaghetti verday to me, it's *spaghetti verdi* (said with accent). So it seem that, to me, certain words that I learned in Spanish, I tend not to use them in English. But rather I tend to use some twisted version of them.
>
> Adrian: Any ideas why?
>
> Mario: I don't know, but somehow—and this maybe doesn't relate directly to this—but somehow I feel my memory, when living in Venezuela, I separated to my memory when I live here in the United States. And I cannot exchange stories, for example about things I did with friends so easily. It's hard for me. It's like to separate words, er, worlds.
>
> Adrian: Hmm. But in both those examples, in spaghetti verdi and in blossoms, transferring your Spanish world to your English world would have helped, wouldn't it?
>
> Mario: Yes it would have. (...) But then I didn't. Why don't I allow myself to do that? I don't know. I guess I just kind of banned everything and said, "O.K., let's forget about those words, including the ones that I might be saying right. And let's just learn, relearn everything again, I guess."

At issue here is the fact that Mario "banned" his L1 linguistic and sociocultural knowledge when reading or speaking in the L2. For Mario, Spanish and English not only contained different words but also different worlds and it unfortunately seemed never the twain shall meet. Mario's L2 learning strategy would not seem very effective or efficient, in the sense that K. Goodman (1996) uses the terms to mean 'able to get the most meaning with the least effort.' Mario was a good reader in Spanish and English, but consider how much better he could be in both languages if he viewed L1 and L2 reading as overlapping worlds if not one world. If he applied his conceptual world knowledge of cherry trees, blossoms, and spaghetti verdi in different language contexts and tasks such as L2 reading, he would be the better for it, and he could devote the time and energy used 'to relearn everything again' to other matters of importance.

Mario's separation of L1/L2 words and worlds seems to be the rule rather than the exception for L2 readers. Y. Goodman (1998) recently claimed that to her knowledge, in all the miscue studies done over the last 30 some odd years, there has never been an example of a reader producing an L1 miscue when reading an L2 text unless the text contained bilingual phrases. The text and context clearly signal to bilingual readers which language is operative. The same appears to be true for bilingual speakers (K. Goodman & Y. Goodman, 1994) and bidialectical writers (Y. Goodman, 1998).

### *Case Study of Sukyong*

Cheongsook Chin's (1996) dissertation, "Korean ESL students' perceptions of themselves as readers and about reading in English," presents a cross-case analysis of five proficient readers of L1 Korean and L2 English. One of the case studies focused on Sukyong, a 25-year-old housewife and mother who lived in America for several years while her husband attended the University of Arizona. She learned English in Korean public schools following the grammar translation method of reading English sentences and translating them into Korean. Sukyong enjoyed the classes and did well on the tests by decoding English texts from parts to whole, looking up all the unknown vocabulary items in the English text, memorizing the meaning of them, and translating each sentence into Korean. She describes her L2 reading process this way:

> I learned that I should identify a subject and a predicate in each sentence to make reading easy. Well, I think it works.... So even now, I stick to that approach. Whatever I read, especially when I am stuck on a complicated sentence, first of all I divide it into a subject and predicate and I also tend to parenthesize adverbial phrases and put a dash before a relative clause.... Then I can fix it up most of the time. (Chin, 1996, pp. 75-76)

This description of L2 reading emphasizes the sort of strategies and decoding process Jung (1992) and other L2 reading researchers (e.g., Coady, 1979; Jolly, 1978; Rigg, 1977) predicted would occur if and when readers viewed L2 reading as primarily a language problem rather than a reading problem. In other words, according to these researchers, readers who consider L1 and L2 reading to involve separate languages and processes will use different strategies for reading each language. To test this hypothesis, we need to consider Sukyong's perception of reading in her L1 Korean.

> When it comes to reading in Korean, there is no such thing as a reading strategy.... I mean it doesn't matter how I read. I am not even aware of it. Korean is my first language...so what

> do you expect? I just read on...whatever I read in Korean, it flows naturally...and I hardly get stuck.... In case I do, I can clarify it based on the context most of the times. If I can't, I don't care and keep going because I know that the meaning will be eventually made clear somehow. (Chin, 1996, p. 75)

Sukyong views L1 and L2 reading differently and uses different reading strategies for each as a result. She claims to be unaware of any L1 reading strategy, but mentions she draws on contextual cues to help her understand difficult passages. If that doesn't help her, she simply keeps reading, focusing on meaning. L1 reading, then, is as a meaning-making process, one in which she has resource to a variety of cue systems and a willingness to tolerate ambiguity. L2 reading, on the other hand, is a sequential process of decoding and translating parts to whole, a process that relies primarily on the reader's grammatical dexterity and leaves little room for ambiguity. Sukyong appears to share Mario's belief that L1 and L2 reading involve separate words and worlds.

### *Case Study of Jinhyuk*

For an alternate L2 reading stance, we now look to the case of Jinhyuk, a 22-year-old male also included in Chin's (1996) study. Jinhyuk was an exchange student studying Business Administration at the University of Arizona for one year in order to improve his English. His memory of English education in Korea matches that of Sukyong's except that he did not find learning EFL by the grammar translation method as enjoyable; he studied English because he had to in order to pass the national college entrance exams, not because he wanted to.

Jinhyuk's view of L1 and L2 reading contrasts sharply with that of Mario's and Sukyong's, though. He considers himself a good reader in English because he is a good reader in Korean:

> In order to be a good ESL reader, first of all, you need to be a good first language reader.... That's the prerequisite. Reading in English is basically to comprehend what you read. If you are good at comprehending what you read in Korean, you will also be better able to comprehend what you read in any other language. (Chin, 1996, pp. 110-111)

Jinhyuk views his L1 knowledge as an essential resource for L2 reading, a view Ruiz (1998) also promotes in regards to language planning and policy. According to this view, second or additional language acquisition does not detract, compete, or interfere with first language processes and knowledge, but rather enhances understanding and appreciation of all languages. Similarly, Jinhyuk explains that L1 reading proficiency can help him "read in any other language." In accordance with a universal-reading-process view, Jinhyuk values reading comprehension strategies such as pre- and post-reading discussions more than grammatical and "fill in the blank" exercises. Through think-aloud protocol-analysis of Jinhyuk's reading, Chin notes Jinhyuk's use of predicting, responding to story organization, monitoring, applying intertextuality, character and etymological analysis. Jinhyuk knows, for example, that all fairy tales "start with 'A long time ago,' 'Long, long time ago,' or 'Once upon a time,'" (Chin, 1996, p. 122) regardless of whether they are Korean, Japanese, or English. He is concerned with meaning and avails himself of any information or reading strategy that will help him comprehend the text.

Jinhyuk also makes clear distinctions about the purposes for L1 and L2 reading. For him, L1 reading is a source of pleasure. He is "crazy about Korean comic strips" (Chin, 1996, p. 108), yet was disappointed by American ones. *Time* and *Newsweek* give him a "splitting headache" and he avoids long English books but will reread his favorite Korean novels and other L1 texts to obtain information, have fun, or kill time. Chin explains that Jinhyuk sees reading in English as an extension of his schoolwork, an academic task, whereas reading in his native language is more closely associated with personal pursuits and interests.

The division between academic and personal uses of language that Chin points out is a fundamental one that strikes to the heart of most, if not all, learning. Cummins (1981) grapples with it in his notions of BICS[3] and CALP.[4] Dewey (1938) discusses it in terms of the individual (personal) transacting with others and the environment to create meaning from experience. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) use the concepts of accommodation and assimilation to note the binary opposition of external and internal realms of knowledge and experience. And finally, K. Goodman and Y. Goodman (1994) address the issue with their concept of schema-driven and schema-forming miscues. Though there are significant differences between these concepts and theories, they all point to a home/personal versus school/academic divide that creates a tension that can be a powerful source of learning. It is also important to recognize that these realms of knowledge and experience are socially constructed ones (Heath, 1984; Scribner & Cole, 1988), and thus are subject to modification with appropriate intervention.

## DISCUSSION

From the foregoing examples we can see that biliterate readers often hold different views toward reading in their L1 and L2, and that these perceptions influence the strategies they rely on in reading L1 and L2 texts. The key distinction suggested here is that of linguistic versus process knowledge and strategy use. When readers such as Mario and Sukyong focus on the surface features of the text and language rather than on the concepts expressed by these features, their concern for form reduces the amount of attention they can devote to meaning; their linguistic concerns limit the range of information sources from which they can draw in the reading process. People have a high tolerance for ambiguity in specific linguistic cues such as orthography and phonology, as variations in font and accent indicate (K. Goodman, 1996). Vocabulary and syntactic structures may also vary between languages, but as miscue and discourse analysis studies have shown, learners are rarely, if ever, confused by the language or discourse community they are currently operating within. They can therefore make accurate predictions concerning text patterns and style to the extent that their language proficiency allows, and that proficiency will be enhanced rather than interrupted by knowledge of additional languages.

This and other evidence (e.g., Brown, K. Goodman, & Marek, 1996) seem to support the universal reading hypothesis put forth by K. Goodman and others (Coady, 1979; Jolly, 1978; Rigg, 1977) in which reading in any language is believed to involve a recursive process of predicting, sampling, testing, confirming and/or disconfirming. Since most adult ESL learners in university settings are already proficient readers in their first language, their L2 reading proficiency will be greatly enhanced if they learn how to apply these same strategies to L2 reading tasks as well. However, as Grabe (1986) points out, there is no guarantee this will happen automatically. It may, but instructional methods, the learners'

perceptions of themselves as readers and reading, and the resources and learning opportunities available will also affect the learning process and outcome.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

The implications for instruction are obvious, and only slightly more difficult to employ than one might initially suspect. The guiding principle of language and reading instruction should be to focus on comprehension, the meaning in the message, not the language in which it is conveyed. L2 reading curricula for adults should facilitate the readers' awareness and use of all the resources available to them in the reading process by integrating theory, methods, materials, and evaluation into a language-rich environment that builds on what learners already know—their language, culture, interests and common experiences (K. Goodman, Y. Goodman, & Flores, 1979).

Given the variety of L1 reading methods ESL readers might have been exposed to and/or believe they follow in L1 and L2 reading, readers must be shown that reading must make sense, that they must transact with a text and author in order to construct their own understanding and text. In literature circles and reading logs, students should discuss their different perceptions of the text, drawing on specific words or phrases within the text as well as personal experiences and background knowledge which support their interpretations. "This helps the students realize that the surface of the language, the print they perceive, is not most important; rather the significant part of reading is the search for meaning" (K. Goodman, Y. Goodman, & Flores, 1979, pp. 38-39).

Strategy lessons such as those suggested by Y. Goodman, Watson, and Burke (1987) can be adapted for older, more proficient L2 learners. Students can be asked to read, without stopping, stories that contain references to unfamiliar cultural references,[5] articles and textbook chapters which contain content-specific knowledge,[6] or any text with characters or references to unusual names such as *Sven* or *Dr. Csikszentmihalyi*. Afterwards, they can discuss what strategies they used to overcome these difficulties as well as the concepts they developed for the unknown referent using contextual cues. Alternately, teachers can alter texts by omitting key words or phrases, then ask students to guess the missing words using the different cue systems available to them. Both techniques encourage readers to draw upon all the resources available to them, encouraging a view of reading as an active process of meaning construction. K. Goodman, Y. Goodman, & Flores (1979) note that strategy lessons such as these are "particularly appropriate for bilinguals insecure about their vocabularies in English" (p. 39). Finally, reading a variety of genres such as those mentioned above provide students with opportunities to experiment with different text type and reading strategy use. Such variability of reading tasks and text is not only common to university settings, and thus useful in preparing students for academic work in the L2, but it also helps reinforce a broader conception of literacy in students and society. This can help those who do not define themselves as literate revalue the "funds of knowledge" (Moll, L. C., Vélez-Ibañez, C., Greenberg, J., Andradi, R., Dwornin, J., Fry, D., Saavedra, E., Tapia, J., & Whitmore, K., 1990) they have resource to in their homes and daily lives.

L2 readers' perceptions about themselves as readers and L1/L2 reading process(es) have a greater effect on literacy development than L2 language proficiency (Chin, 1996; K. Goodman, Y. Goodman, & Flores 1979; Jung, 1992). Miscue and retrospective miscue analysis can be an effective way to engage students in a collaborative inquiry process about

their own reading behaviors and beliefs. Rather than adopting a deficient view of L2 learners, teacher-researchers should ask students and themselves "Why did an observed response occur?" and "How can we learn from it?" As Freire (1968) and others (Giroux, 1988; Shor, 1992) note, problem-posing such as this creates a more equitable balance of power in the classroom and communicates to students a respect for language and learning. Although teachers may not have time to conduct complete case studies such as those presented above of Mario, Sukyong, and Jinhyuk, students can record and discuss their own L2 reading using the collaborative retrospective miscue analysis techniques developed by Costello (1992) and Worsnop (1980) and more fully explained in Y. Goodman & Marek (1996). Imagine how Jinhyuk's concern for comprehension could help Mario and Sukyong see beyond the specific language features of a text. Imagine how Mario's love for learning and pleasure in reading a wide variety of authors, languages, and genres could motivate Jinhyuk and Sukyong to expand their reading behaviors and attitudes. Organizing L2 language and literacy courses to include such discussions allows students to be teachers, teachers to be students, and all to benefit from imminently teachable moments.

## NOTES

1. K. Goodman (1971 & 1973) does allow for some "minor" modifications in L1 & L2 reading processes to adjust to distinct features of the orthography and grammatical structure of any particular language. In his most recent book on reading, K. Goodman (1996) phrases it thus: "In spite of some diversity within, reading is a universal psycholinguistic process, a single way of making sense" (p. 9).
2. In RMA transcripts, (...) indicates an omission in the interview. Backchanneling, false starts, and other oral language features have also been omitted to increase readability . The "$" is used before words used by the speaker/reader that are unknown to the teacher/researcher.
3. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS); see Cummins (1981) for more information.
4. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP); see Cummins (1981) for more information.
5. See, for example, "Godfrey Cambridge and Fame" by Angelou (1997).
6. See, for example "Downhole heave compensator: A tool designed by hindsight" by Kirk (1974).

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