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Reviewed work:

English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom (2nd ed.). (2007). Barbara M. Birch. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Pp. 236 + xiii. ISBN 0805859292. \$26.96

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The first edition of *English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom* was granted the California Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages 2004 David E. Eskey Award for Curricular Innovation. In the second edition, the author has made further changes and updates in response to ongoing reading research as well as requests from readers of the previous edition. This revised volume shows the author's continued commitment to professional innovation in the field of second language (L2) reading, learning, and teaching.

In L2 reading classrooms, as Treiman (2001) points out, bottom-up and top-down approaches and methodologies complement one another. While proponents of the whole-language approach argue that top-down processing plays an important role in reading, Barbara Birch's book primarily aims to address insightful issues on the importance of bottom-up processing for L2 readers, as the title of the book shows. For this reason, this volume is a valuable resource for practitioners and teachers of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) who emphasize accuracy in their reading classrooms.

This review attempts to complement the previous review by Jen Tindale published by *Reading in a Foreign Language* in 2002 so as to help readers stay current with the new edition of the text.

We commence with the questions “How do the first and second editions of the volume differ?” or “What changes has the author made?” These inquiries are especially useful for readers who have already read the book or would like to complement the first edition. As the author claims, “this edition is intended to be a more reader-friendly version of the first edition. The content of each chapter is much the same, but the organization is made clearer for the student and the few errors are corrected” (p. ix).

Overall, Birch has made seven main changes: (a) more detailed accounts of alphabets, writing systems, and history of written English and spelling; (b) extended discussion about the cognition of written language and reading transfer; (c) augmentation of phonemic, vocal, subvocal, and articulatory development and L2 reading processing along with instructional activities and strategies for teaching these skills in the classroom; (d) elaboration of the concepts of graphs and graphemes; (e) development of the probabilistic-reasoning section in the context of L2 reading; (f) the most recent account of brain activation studies; and (g) reading fluency.

Like the first edition, this second edition of the volume comprises 10 chapters along with three main appendices (one about English graphemes, another on English phonemes and their principal spellings, and a third providing a workbook supplement). Each of the chapters starts with prereading discussions and study guide questions, which arouse interest and activate readers’ background knowledge of the topics discussed in that chapter. Furthermore, the author provides discussion questions at the end of each chapter; such questions enable readers to interact with the text and help them apply the concepts presented in each chapter. Another feature of the book is “Spotlight on Teaching” in chapters 4–9, which is aimed at helping readers design classroom activities based on the theoretical accounts discussed in the book.

In chapter 1, “The Expert Decision Maker,” the author sees reading as an interactive (top-down and bottom-up) process. Reading involves information flowing upward and downward if readers are to comprehend a certain text effectively. In short, this chapter shows the complexity of proficient reading. Based on Goodman’s (1967) notion of *reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game*, Birch argues that it is indispensable for readers to develop their L2 linguistic knowledge and employ different reading strategies in order to become effective and interactive information processors and expert decision makers.

Compared to the first edition of the book, chapter 2, “Writing Systems,” provides more elaboration on alphabets and writing systems of different languages (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Hebrew). In this respect, the author contends that the L2 reading literature gives little attention to the importance of first language (L1) writing systems. In the classroom, this issue is worth addressing, particularly when L1 and L2 do not share the same writing systems like Chinese-English or Thai-English. The author also promotes the idea that L2 writing systems play a crucial role in L2 learners’ reading development.

In chapter 3, Birch addresses the compelling issue of the role of transfer from L1 to L2, and she raises the questions of whether L1 and L2 readers with different writing systems develop different knowledge and processing strategies and whether these strategies transfer from L1 to L2. The discussion of such issues is presented along with four sample cases of speakers of

Spanish, Greek, Arabic, and Chinese. These two issues certainly remind reading teachers of the important role of the cognitive dimension of L2 reading learning and acquisition.

The fourth chapter highlights the relationship between listening comprehension and reading. Birch argues that compared with accurate pronunciation, accurate listening comprehension correlates more with reading comprehension. She also argues that “pronunciation, in fact, only comes into play in oral reading” (p. 66). Further, the “Spotlight on Teaching” section following this chapter provides sample ideas about how to improve reading proficiency through listening practice.

In chapter 5, the author emphasizes the need for gaining knowledge of graphemes and practicing different low-level strategies for recognizing graphs. Unlike the first edition, the current edition touches on discussions on reading speed, pattern recognition, and word recognition at the bottom-up level. Birch argues that these aspects play crucial roles in helping L2 readers to be proficient and effective at further reading levels.

In the sixth chapter, Birch goes into a discussion of the English writing system, which she labels as “opaque” in that “the correspondence between graphemes and phonemes is not one-to-one” (p. 87). This opaqueness is owing to borrowings and other historical changes in English. For this reason, as she notes, some reading teachers choose not to teach the English writing system because it is inconsistent and complex. However, in doing so, they devalue how direct instruction and positive attitudes of teachers towards the English writing system can facilitate English L2 readers in enhancing their reading abilities. Another fascinating argument in this chapter concerns the use of *probabilistic reasoning*, the ability to take advantage of certain graphic consistencies and then use knowledge of the probability of these consistencies as a particular processing strategy to read graphs in English. As a whole, the author encourages classroom teachers, in this chapter, to see the learnability of the English writing system and the tangible benefits of direct instruction on it.

The seventh chapter addresses three phonics methodologies: a synthetic method, a linguistic method, and smart phonics. From these methodologies, the author argues that phonics is eminently teachable if teachers substantially understand how learners read. More important, Birch argues that phonics instruction complements the whole-language-reading movement. The remaining sections of the chapter touch on reading strategies (i.e., meaning-based, partially-alphabetic, and fully-alphabetic strategies). Several succinct ideas about ESL reading instruction are offered, which may fit in well for reading teachers who work with beginning learners.

Chapter 8 discusses morphological processes in English; the author briefly examines different features of English morphology along with a comparison of morphology in other languages. Further, because of the differences between English morphology and that of various L1s, Birch looks into how different reading strategies are employed in L2 reading comprehension. When working with nonnative English-speaking learners, direct instruction in English morphology, even though it is time consuming, may help them understand how English words are constructed. The ultimate benefit of morphology-based instruction is that learners may use English morphological cues in reading or in guessing certain unknown words, thereby reducing readers’ cognitive loads in some way.

Chapter 9, “Vocabulary Acquisition,” is a crucial chapter of the book. This issue is paramount in discussing a bottom-up-oriented approach to reading even though “it is not always obvious how reading comprehension relates to vocabulary acquisition in the classroom” (p. 144). This chapter addresses various issues such as top-down strategies of vocabulary acquisition, learner variables in vocabulary acquisition, lexical variables in vocabulary acquisition, and strategies of word learning. These issues represent what novice ESL or EFL learners face in L2 reading. The author emphasizes that vocabulary should be taught efficiently in a reading class so as to “empower students to be active human word processors” (p. 163). More importantly, vocabulary should be seen as comprehensible lexical input for learners to acquire new vocabularies using different word-learning strategies and in turn to enhance their reading comprehension (Hunt & Beglar, 2005).

In closing the volume, the author explores two other issues in chapter 10: (a) effects of instruction on brain activation and (b) reading fluency in English L2 reading. Such issues reflect how this edition of the book differs from the first edition and how recent research in these areas makes a contribution to further understandings of learners’ reading comprehension as a whole. Birch elaborates on silent reading fluency and fluent oral reading along with useful suggestions for improving oral reading strategies. Finally, Birch asserts that rapid reading can come more easily for learners at a later learning stage. In the process of becoming more fluent readers, due attention should be paid to the bottom-up ESL reading. These statements indicate the importance of bottom-up L2 reading instruction as the starting point for further L2 reading development.

On the whole, with the additions and changes made by Birch, this current volume provides a more practical guide for ESL and EFL practitioners. However, the book focuses heavily on the linguistic and cognitive aspects of L2 reading, and it does not make clear how social dimensions of L1 and L2 co-contribute to reading development and how a reader balances lower-level with higher-level processing strategies. The second limitation of the book is that the author does not address how the bottom-up reading model may be facilitated by noticing activities. These cognitively oriented activities may complement the linguistic dimension highlighted in the book (Schmidt, 2001).

Although Birch provides counterarguments to some of the widely-held ideas in the literature on reading throughout the book, it would also be valuable to see more theoretically and empirically-grounded discussions (i.e., the relationship between listening and reading among English L2 readers). A case in point is the author’s inconclusive tone when providing suggestions on the phonemic awareness of the four hypothetical English L2 readers. Another limitation of the book is that Birch provides little space for the use of the strategies for skipping unknown words in English L2 reading.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this second edition of Barbara Birch’s *English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom* is a good resource for teachers whose goal is to help learners improve their English L2 reading abilities through a bottom-up approach. It is a practical guide for reading teachers who wish to make use of basic linguistic knowledge to help students develop their reading skills. The notions presented are compatible with the findings of Nassaji (2003) that lower-level text processing skills are important for advanced ESL readers and, in addition, bring

potential benefits for beginning or intermediate English L2 readers, as Birch points out in both editions of the book.

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