

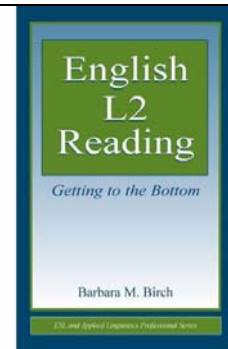
***English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom***

**Barbara M. Birch**

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**Pp. xii + 200**

***Reviewed by Maryam Borjian and Ruhma Choudhury***



‘Bottom-up’, ‘top-down’ or a ‘balanced-reading’ approach— which model best explains the complex process of reading comprehension? Early theories, notably those which emerged within the school of behaviorism, viewed reading as a bottom-up process and maintained that children best learned to read by first decoding the smallest components of language, such as letters, vocabulary words, pronunciation points, and so on. This view was eventually challenged by whole-language educators and researchers who called for language to be considered as a whole and who, thus, favored a holistic approach. Concerning reading as a “psycholinguistic-guessing-game” (Goodman, 1967), whole-language theorists emphasized top-down reading strategies, such as problem-solving, prediction, etc., and held that students learned best by working to understand the meaning of whole texts. In accordance with this shift in thinking, literature over the last three decades reports a strong emphasis on top-down strategies. However, some researchers (Eskey, 1993; Nunes, 1999) remark that a de-emphasis on bottom-up processing will not promote accuracy, and that, alternatively, a strong emphasis should be placed on a balanced-reading approach.

The book under review, *English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom* written by Barbara Birch (2002) -- the recipient of the first David E. Eskey Annual Memorial Award from the California Teachers of English Speakers of Other Languages -- places emphasis on the ‘bottom-up’ aspects of L2 reading. The author, who is a proponent of a balanced-reading approach, views whole-language philosophy as “incomplete” in that it de-emphasizes the bottom-up aspect of reading. She maintains that she does not attempt to criticize whole-language approach but rather seeks to supplement it with an “integrative reading approach” (p. 4), in which both high- and low-level reading strategies can co-exist side-by-side. Disregarding the “reading-as-a-psycholinguistic-guessing-game” metaphor, Birch considers reading an interactive, top-down and bottom-up process in which information flows upward from the bottom and downward from the top. In order to produce proficient ESL/EFL readers, both fluent and accurate, the author considers employing a balanced and integrative reading approach to be the ultimate solution.

Birch’s book is organized into ten concise but inclusive chapters, supplemented by a comprehensive bibliography and two long appendices of English Graphemes and English Phonemes. First, the author sets the stage by reviewing the literature on the theoretical

frameworks of both the whole-language and the balanced-reading approaches. Looking through the lens of the latter approach, she then moves on to introduce her thesis, presenting what she calls the “interactive model of the reading” (p. 8), which consists of four language processing strategies, namely orthographic, phonological, lexical and syntactic. Referring to her background, Birch, then, applies a highly linguistic approach toward her topic by closely examining several aspects of English L2 reading, including its “writing systems”, “processing letters”, “English spelling”, “English morphophonemic writing”, and so on.

How do ‘bottom-up’ strategies enable ESL/EFL students to break into the English language system? To answer this question, Birch returns to the four aforementioned language processing strategies. According to her, the discrimination of English sounds, especially vowels, can be problematic for ESL/EFL learners. Thus, *phonological strategies*, or recognition of English phones, phonemes and allophones, enable students to recognize the highly complex sound system of the English language. *Orthographical strategies*, or recognition of English graphemes and graphs, on the other hand, enable language learners to recognize the letter shapes of the English alphabet and match them with their sounds. “English spelling” as Birch maintains “is often considered chaotic or inconsistent” (p 22). Arguing that no other writing system is like the English one, the author holds that teachers should not rush students through early stages, but rather allow them to continue to read easy texts as long as necessary. Birch, then, introduces the *lexical strategies*, such as *word repetition*, *recognition of English affixes*, which help L2 readers recognize words and access word meanings. Challenging the notion of “skipping over unknown words”, the author regards, “[t]he simple truth is that if readers skip the words they don't know, they don't learn them, and often they don't understand the texts they need to understand” (p. 131). Therefore, teachers should put emphasis on vocabulary building during reading for comprehension. Although Birch provides a fairly comprehensible account and a detailed analysis of the three above-mentioned strategies, she overlooks the role of the syntactic ones. Her discussion excludes explicit comments about what constitutes the syntactic strategies and how these strategies could be beneficial to ESL/EFL learners.

The book has several strengths. First, the author provides an impressive range of literature on the topic, which needs to be applauded for its debate format giving voice both to opponents and proponents of the whole-language approach. The content of the book may give the impression that Birch belongs to the former group; however, she makes sure to include the theoretical frameworks of the latter group, as well. Second, the book provides a detailed account of the role of students’ L1 in the process of English L2 reading. An innovative aspect of the book, for example, is the inclusion of four language learners, each of whom speaks a different language. Mohammad, one of the learners, is Egyptian and speaks Arabic. Having discussed the English complex writing system, Birch explains what aspects of English writing is challenging for Mohammed: “His writing system [Arabic] is alphabetic, but it uses different symbols. It is also consonantal ...his eyes [Mohammed] are trained to process writing in the opposite direction from English” (p. 36). Consequently, not only does Mohammed need to learn the English vowels and writing symbols, but he also needs to learn how to read from left to right, and so forth. Another positive aspect of the book is the inclusion of ample lesson plans, and sample exercises, which assist English L2 teachers to integrated bottom-up activities in their lessons. These exercises may help L2 teachers to fill the gap many teachers find in whole language instruction of L2 reading.

The book has, however, two downsides. First, in spite of the author's claim that she favors a "balanced-reading approach", the content of her book resembles its title, i.e. *Getting to the Bottom*. The significance of phonics strategies and the focus on the ways in which these strategies can be beneficial to ESL/EFL readers is her main concern. For example, as a proponent of bottom-up strategies of "vocabulary acquisition", Birch, questions the notion of "skipping over unknown words," a whole-language reading strategy which encourages students to skip unknown words as they read. This practice, according to the advocates of the whole-language approach, encourages learners to read extensively large quantities of texts, i.e. *extensive reading approach*. By challenging the notion of skipping words, Birch, opens a can of questions: How, for example, would an L2 reading student, or a teacher, apply an "extensive reading approach"? Should this approach be entirely eliminated? If not, then what might be some alternatives? These questions, however, remain unanswered. Second, as a linguist, Birch takes a highly linguistic approach to her analysis of L2 reading and yet overlooks the pedagogical aspects of the topic under investigation. Conceptualized within linguistic frameworks, she takes linguistic terminology, such as *phone*, *allophone*, *phoneme*, *morpheme*, among many others, as the unit of her analysis, assuming that her readers have at least an introductory knowledge of linguistics. This assumption might hold true for ESL teachers or TESOL MA students graduating from North American universities, where they are required to take an introductory course on English linguistics, but this is rarely the case with a typical EFL practitioner. And yet, according to the preface the book is also intended for EFL teachers and practitioners. How would the book, then, be beneficial to EFL teachers, most of whom are merely trained in the pedagogical aspects of English teaching?

Notwithstanding these points, the book is beneficial to anyone with an interest in English L2 reading, especially reading researchers, ESL practitioners and teachers, and yet it has much to offer those interested in the bottom-up aspects of English L2 reading. Not only is the book well documented in reading theories, but it also links the low-level reading strategies to practice. Additionally, Birch's book fits within the growing emphasis on accuracy of form. It undoubtedly empowers reading teachers who seek to extend their bottom-up focus.

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