



Reviewed work:

Insights into Second Language Reading. (2005). Keiko Koda. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://www.cambridge.org/> Pp. 320. ISBN 0-521-54513-7. \$32.99

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This new volume by Keiko Koda is in the Cambridge Applied Linguistics series, a series which, according to the comments on the back cover, aims to be "of direct relevance to language teaching and learning and of particular interest to applied linguists, researchers, language teachers, and teacher trainers." It is the second major volume in this series that is dedicated to reading in a second language, following *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading* (Carrell, Devine, and Eskey, 1988).

Koda's previous research has been mainly about first language (L1) to second language (L2) transfer of reading skills, and the impact of different writing systems on L2 reading ability. Thus, it is not surprising that she is particularly strong on these two issues, especially transfer, a concept which underlies the whole book. Koda's own statement of her key presupposition provides a useful starting point here: "The central assumption underlying the cross-linguistic approach is that L1 experience embeds habits of mind, instilling specific processing mechanisms, which frequently kick in during L2 reading" (p. 9).

Early on in the book, Koda states: "This volume's primary objectives are to establish a foundation for expanding current L2 reading research by re-examining accepted L1 reading concepts from L2 points of view and, by so doing, to uncover new research agendas particularly relevant to L2 reading development" (p. 11). So it is the declared aim of the writer, made clear by the book's subtitle, *A Cross-Linguistic Approach*, to find links between L1 reading research and the study of L2 reading. However, she is aware that this connection is not a simple one, setting out in her introduction three key distinctions between L1 and L2 reading: L2 readers typically have prior literacy experience, limited knowledge of the L2, and are influenced both by their L1 and L2 as they try to read in a second language. Very adeptly, she shows how each of these factors could influence any research one may wish to carry out into L2 reading. As an

example, she shows how reading theories of understanding texts based on "integrative interaction of the textual information and pre-existing reader knowledge" would need to take these three factors on board in order to investigate this area in an L2 context (p. 8). Thus her handling of this issue is wisely done: there is a vast amount of research into L1 reading that those researching L2 reading can draw on; yet there are no simple parallels and Koda rightly shows us that every hint to be gleaned from L1 research has to be subjected to rigorous scrutiny. Moreover, she shows great consistency in applying these three crucial differences to every aspect of reading that she discusses. Thus, in the last chapter, on comprehension instruction, she points out the particular difficulties of applying L1 teaching methods to L2 learning, invoking the same three factors.

The book is arranged in four main sections. It starts with "Theoretical Foundations", a relatively short introductory section but one in which Koda lays the groundwork for the whole book, particularly what she means by a "cross-linguistic approach" (see pp.13-15). Here she describes two contrasting paradigms for understanding L1 to L2 transfer. According to the earlier framework, reading procedures are universal whereas the more recent conceptualisation contends that readers with different L1 backgrounds will employ different reading tactics. Rather than implying that the two are mutually exclusive, Koda believes they can be complementary since they are based on different factors, both of which are part of reading: the universal approach is based on conceptual manipulations (such as the use of background knowledge to form predictive hypotheses) and the language specific view centres on text processing.

The second section, "Essential Components", breaks down the reading process into six constituent elements beginning with word recognition and building up through vocabulary knowledge, intra-word awareness and word-knowledge, information integration in sentence processing, and discourse processing, to the last element in this section, text structure and comprehension. This is followed by "Looking at the Whole" which presents a holistic view of reading, showing how the six components in the previous sections interlink. Two key aspects are considered: individual differences in reading and strategic reading. The key idea in strategic reading is that self-monitoring is essential.

The final section, "Theory into Practice", covers two areas: comprehension assessment and comprehension instruction. In the assessment section, Koda is very critical of standardised objective assessment, maintaining that there is often little relationship with everyday language use: indeed, she continues, the relationship with reading itself may be tenuous, high scores reflecting finely-tuned test-taking strategies. Classroom-based assessment is favoured: there is an outline of its contents and method of implementation. Teachers looking for very direct applications to classroom pedagogy will search in vain in the final chapter on comprehension instruction. Nevertheless, they will find useful guidelines, for example, concerning how findings discussed earlier in the book can be translated into practice. It is my view that pedagogy has often either ignored or been ignorant of robust research findings. However, Koda emphasises the opposite danger: simplistic applications of research to teaching so that, for instance, observations regarding eye movements of efficient readers are translated into classroom pedagogy that suggests that if only weak students would move their eyes correctly, their reading ability would be improved.

This is a very ambitious book. It seeks to be comprehensive in its coverage of the major themes and in this respect it is remarkably successful within its 273 pages of text. For example, in the introductory chapter, Koda outlines three distinct ways of defining reading competence – the cognitive, developmental, and functional perspectives – but rather than making choices between them, expresses the need to incorporate all of them in exploring L2 reading development. She refers to a huge range of sources but the fact that an old favourite of mine, Urquhart and Weir (1998) receives no mention whatsoever, despite its pertinence to many of the discussions, perhaps reflects the American perspective of the book. Personally I was a little disappointed to find nothing about my own research area, skimming, though the section on reading skills and strategies was very helpful, particularly where she uses her finely honed gift of cutting through the confusion of many competing theories, arriving at very succinct summaries of key factors or distinctions, and then proceeding to completely new conceptualisations.

This she does with great mastery in the skills versus strategies discussion. She subsumes both strategies and skills under reading actions, and differentiates between them through contrasting intention and activation: "Reading actions, in short, can be interpreted as strategies when executed intentionally. Skills, in contrast, refer to what readers actually do to achieve their intended actions" (p. 211).

Only those who have struggled through some of the misconceived nonsense often written on this subject will realise what sound sense Koda is making here.

Another sign of the comprehensiveness of this book is the inclusion of details on a topic sometimes overlooked by writers on reading (including Urquhart and Weir!) and yet of growing importance, namely working memory. The section dedicated to this topic concludes that this is an extremely important area ("an indispensable factor in successful comprehension" – p. 203). However, Koda is conscious of the lack of robust findings in this research and so ends by saying "the critical question is whether the construct alludes to differences in the working-memory resources themselves or to differences in the ability to use them efficiently" (p. 203). This statement suggests to me that if problems occur in reading which are related to working memory, it may be because of working memory's limited capability or because the resources of working memory are not being used efficiently. However, by the final chapter of the book, "Comprehension instruction", it has become axiomatic that "working memory's two major functions – computation and temporary information storage – compete for its limited capacity" (p. 255), and indeed there are constant references to this limited capacity throughout this chapter. Not only does she appear to be contradicting her more guarded comments on working memory earlier in the book, but experts in this field are by no means unanimous about the idea of two competing functions. Many researchers have followed the competing demands view first put forward by Daneman and Carpenter (1981) but eminent opponents include Baddeley (1999: 38).

To what extent does the book give practical insights useful for teaching? There can be a danger that applied linguists inform applied linguists who inform applied linguists with the result that ultimately nothing is actually "applied"! The last chapter, "Comprehension instruction", is in fact extremely valuable as Koda summarises very succinctly a wide range of commendable teaching practices based on empirical research. However, in the limited number of pages dedicated to this theme, she goes further than simply summarising applications by laying down

principles by which research can be applied to the classroom. For example, in a section entitled "research interpretation and instructional applications", she sets out principles and pitfalls, one example of the latter being the all-too-common besetting sin of "treating correlates as causal factors" (p. 264). The example she gives derives from the finding that there are high correlations between vocabulary and reading scores resulting in the misguided notion that what students must therefore need is simply text-word definitions.

An interesting further line of research (not mentioned by Koda) might be to study whether the development of reading skills in an L2, say for study purposes, has an impact on L1 reading. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it does: I remember teaching reading skills to EFL students and being thanked because the course had helped them study in their own language!

Finally two quibbles – one relatively minor, the other possibly of critical importance to the potential readership. Koda writes, of necessity in a book covering such a vast range of ideas, in a very condensed style which, at its best, is superbly succinct but occasionally becomes as impenetrable as a rainforest. In addition, she perhaps makes unjustified assumptions about what concepts her readers will know. "Lexical scaffolding", for example, is discussed in some detail but never explained, and this, coupled with the extreme concision, can result in sentences such as: "Lexical scaffolding also can offset inequitable L1 facilitation stemming from differential degrees of lexical commonality between the two languages" (p. 250). A further complaint is the number of typographical errors although they do have potential for some amusement, such as, in the chapter on comprehension instruction, the value accorded to "cooperative *leaning*" (p. 268)!

My second quibble is the inexplicable and unacceptable lack of an index. I have seen two copies of this book and neither had one. I even looked at the pagination to see if a block of pages had been inadvertently omitted. But no, the lack of an index seems to be based on a decision rather than an oversight. Unfortunately, this does make the book extremely frustrating to use for study. For example, I wanted to see what Koda had to say about schema theory. I resorted to looking at the contents pages. No obvious reference there. Finally I found it within the discourse processing section under the heading "Functions of knowledge in text processing", a perfectly reasonable place to look if you know what schema theory is in the first place! The lack of an index is particularly problematic for a book of this sort. As it is so wide-ranging and seeks to cover so many different aspects of reading, it is unlikely that readers will sit down and work straight through it. It is more likely, and more sensible, to use it as a starting point for the particular interest they have at the time. Regrettably, they may find it impossible to access that starting point just because they cannot find it.

This lack of an index is a great shame because in general this book is a superbly written launching pad for many different areas of study related to L2 reading. Koda has the knack of breaking complex issues down so that their essential aspects are presented clearly and fairly and new insights are then developed from this starting point. I have already found this book extremely useful in my own research. Even without an index it can still be highly recommended.

References

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