

Reviewed work:

English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom. (2002). Barbara Birch. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Pp. 200. ISBN 0805838996. \$19.95

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English L2 Reading: Getting to the bottom, as suggested by its title, is a book that focuses on lower level reading strategies in L1 and L2 and their impact on reading in English as a second language. It examines research into lower level reading strategies, with the aim of supplementing (rather than replacing) whole language approaches that favour higher level reading strategies. Birch takes an interactive approach to reading, seeing it as an interaction between top and bottom reading processes (i.e. comprehension and decoding), between reader and text, and between reader and writer (p. 4). As the book is intended mainly for teachers of beginning to intermediate ESL/EFL students (as well as for researchers), this review provides a teacher's perspective on its practical value.

To that end, it should first be noted that the book is based on practical as well as theoretical considerations. Sprinkled throughout each chapter are references to the pedagogical implications for ESL/EFL learners of L1 and L2 reading research. In addition, six of the ten chapters contain a section headed 'Spotlight on Teaching' in which Birch suggests classroom ideas based on the concepts discussed within the chapter. Following the two appendices ('English graphemes' and 'English phonemes') is a 14 page 'Workbook Supplement', consisting of 12 exercises in phonology and morphology aimed at teachers. These exercises are of the sort that could be found in an undergraduate linguistics textbook, but their inclusion here is useful for teachers who wish to review these concepts or for those who have a limited background in this area. Chapters 1 to 9 begin with pre-reading and study guide questions, and finish with discussion questions – common features of text books for ESL/EFL teachers.

The first chapter provides a brief overview of the various processes involved in reading English and an explanation of how these processes interact. Psycholinguistic (top-down) approaches and earlier interactive models of reading that emphasise higher level reading processes are criticised for their lack of attention to lower level processes. The basic premise of the book, that the latter are of particular significance for ESL/EFL readers is outlined, and the 'expert decision maker' model of reading is introduced as a metaphor to explain the reading process.

The following two chapters examine the use of lower level reading strategies in several languages other than English. In chapter 2, Birch provides detailed information about the

development and use of different writing technologies (i.e. logographic, syllabic and alphabetic). In chapter 3, research into different low level reading strategies in various languages is reviewed and the potential for positive and negative transfer of L1 strategies to reading in English explained. In this chapter, Birch introduces four hypothetical readers – Mari-Carmen (Spanish), Despina (Greek), Mohammed (Arabic) and Ho (Chinese) – who are subsequently referred to throughout the book for illustrative purposes.

Chapter 4, 'Listening skills in reading', explains phonological processing in reading, arguing that L2 readers need to develop skills in the perception and recognition of English sounds and that these skills are more relevant to reading than accurate pronunciation. As well as providing a basic explanation of the sound system and suprasegmental features of English, the chapter includes a brief discussion of the phonemic awareness needs of ESL/EFL learners, and some more specific suggestions for planning lessons to meet these needs. It finishes with the first 'Spotlight on Teaching', which in this case outlines some (very) simple auditory perception and discrimination activities.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 examine orthographic processing. In Chapter 5, 'Processing letters', the focus is on the graph processing strategies used by proficient readers of English. Birch is critical of misinterpretations of the idea that readers 'sample' the text: although she concludes that the ability to read by sampling "must be the ultimate goal" (p. 71) for ESL/EFL readers, she warns against the dangers of basing lessons on a simple view of sampling. 'Spotlight on teaching' in this chapter provides a lesson plan model for teaching consonant grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence, and is obviously aimed at very beginning (and very young) learners: "make the grapheme shapes in sand" (p. 72).

Chapter 6 demonstrates that when viewed in terms of reading rules rather than spelling rules, the English spelling system is more systematic than it may first appear to teachers and ESL/EFL learners. Probabilistic reasoning strategies for consonants and vowels are explained, with reference to the role of context in assisting the reader to predict grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences (particularly for consonants) and the need for ESL/EFL readers to extend their knowledge of these strategies. Chapter 7, 'Approaches to phonics', provides an evaluative overview of phonics methodologies, suggesting that although phonics has largely been rejected in favour of whole language approaches (in L1 contexts) it is possible to combine the two. Several ideas for reading instruction based on segmentation for ESL/EFL readers are suggested: again these ideas are clearly most suited to young beginners.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on lexical processing strategies. Chapter 8, 'Morphophonemic writing', examines the relationship between English morphology and reading strategies, and briefly reviews research into the use of both by ESL/EFL readers reading English. Chapter 9 stresses the importance of vocabulary acquisition, and explains the operation of the phonological loop in learning new words. The lexical variables that affect word learning are discussed together with implications for learners. A keyword strategy (after Ellis and Beaton, 1993) is suggested to supplement learners' existing vocabulary strategies, along with a short list of classroom techniques. Birch concludes the book with a summary in chapter 10.

It is beyond the scope of this review to critically evaluate the "expert decision maker" model of L1 reading proposed by Birch in chapter 1 (and referred to throughout the book) in any great depth. It is clear however that the book's focus remains on the interaction between the reader and the text, whereas proponents of new literacy approaches argue that "reading processes are inherently contextual and relative, and need to be understood in relation to broader cultural and social roles and purposes" (Burns & de Silva Joyce, 2000: xi).

Hudson (1998) claims that it is not simply L1 orthography that can affect L2 reading but also L1 literacy practices, and further, that "whether the L2 reader is an immigrant engaged in filling out forms, a foreign student in an L2 class reading an assigned text, or a secondary- or tertiary-level student in a foreign language context will affect in distinct ways the role that L1 literacy plays" (p. 40). As noted by Hood, Solomon & Burns (1996), readers "rely on different aspects of bottom-up or top-down skills and strategies according to the kinds of texts they are reading" (p. 21). It could be assumed therefore that in reading different text types in English there may be differing degrees of positive or negative transfer from lower level skills and strategies in L1, depending on the extent to which the reader is relying on these strategies. Although these matters are not of interest to Birch, some detailed information on specific difficulties learners from different L1 backgrounds are likely to have with different text types as a result of this could well be of interest to teachers.

A further consequence of overlooking social context is that the language content of the 'Spotlight on Teaching' sections is somewhat limited: many of the activities are based on isolated and unnatural chunks of language, rather than real language in use. This results in some unlikely sentence examples, such as "I care for my pets. I am careful to give them water" (p. 125). This activity, and others could easily be adapted and extended to reflect real written language, possibly through corpus analysis or by reference to the Longman Grammar of Written and Spoken English (1999).

Birch's four hypothetical readers serve to personalise the theory, although as an approach this has a couple of limitations. Firstly, as the hypothetical readers (and their languages) are not listed in the index, it is not possible to follow their case histories without skimming through each chapter. Secondly, although an analysis of the technological basis of the first languages of these hypothetical readers shows that Birch has chosen them, not merely to represent the typical learner backgrounds that ESL/EFL teachers may encounter in the States as it would initially seem, but to represent larger groups of languages, this is not made clear to the reader. As a result, teachers using this book who work with learners from other backgrounds (e.g. Korean, Thai, and Indonesian – all common in Australian EFL classrooms) may not realise that these case histories are also relevant to their students.

The case histories would have more practical value if all the information about each readers' anticipated reading difficulties and the strategies to address them were pulled together in a more systematic way, and included some indication of the other languages that each 'reader' also represents. The need for systematic organisation also applies to the *Spotlight on Teaching* sections at the end of each chapter. A busy teacher seeking simply to glean a few teaching tips from the book without having to read each chapter will be disappointed – these sections make little sense without a thorough reading of the foregoing chapter, and provide no information

about the learner groups that would most benefit from the activities suggested (although most seem to be directed at young early beginners). Likewise, there are many potentially useful teaching ideas within the body of various chapters that are of limited use because they lack reference to specific learner groups, and also cannot be traced through the index.

Despite these criticisms, English L2 reading is a potentially valuable resource for practising teachers and teachers-in-training of beginning to intermediate level students with the time and interest to read it thoroughly. It provides extensive information on phonological, orthographic and lexical processing strategies, and contains many useful insights into the effect of L1 on reading in L2. It is perhaps of less value to teachers who are after more 'instant' satisfaction or are seeking practical ideas for older or more advanced learners.

References

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