

Psycholinguistics and Second Language Acquisition

Learning the Second language (L₂) basically implies acquiring the language of literacy and reading is the first step in this process. Understanding how one learns to read can therefore guide us in formulating the necessary pedagogic approaches. Learning to read is a complex process, however. Even in the native or first language (L₁), the failure to develop appropriate reading skills at an early stage of the learning process can grievously impair the learner's communicative ability. This is more crucial for L₂, where the learning process is usually formal, no matter whether it implies a subconscious acquisition or conscious learning. Much of our theoretical understanding of language acquisition comes from psycholinguistics, the study of psychological states and mental activity associated with the acquisition and use of language, including writing and reading, based on which we now know¹ that formal reading is not a visual process alone. Instead, it involves two kinds of information:

- visual information from the printed page, and
- the non-visual information that comes from what we already know about the world in general.

Indeed, the more that is already known *behind the eyeball*, the less is the visual information required. This is precisely what the process of retrieving meaning, the goal of reading, is all about and fuses the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic dimensions of the reading process. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model that shows how these two dimensions can be adapted into a multi-stage process that the reading process really is. This ideally comprises two stages — (a) simple comprehension and (b)

Only a small part of the information needed for reading comprehension comes from the printed page. More often than not, comprehension precedes the identification of individual words.

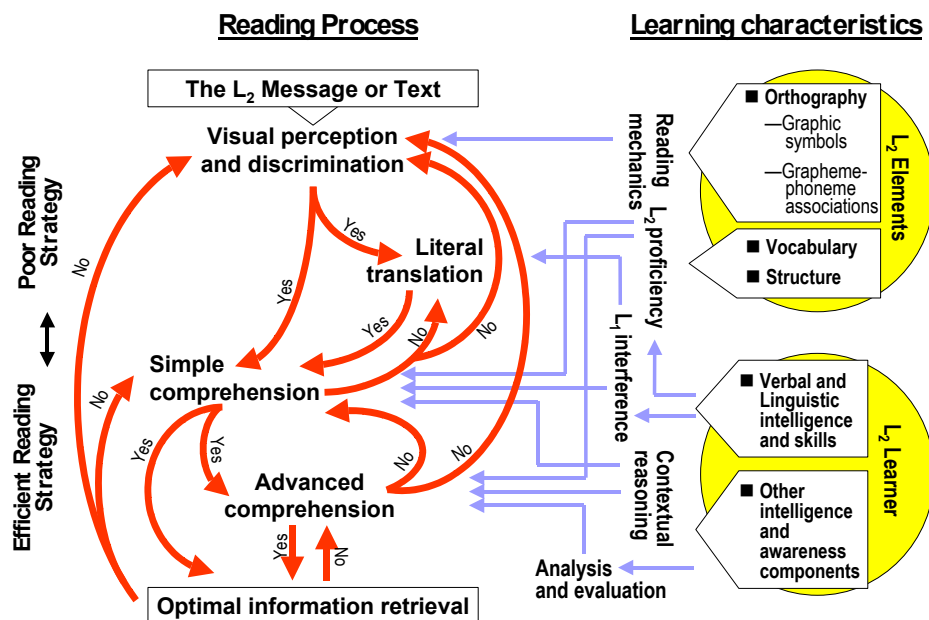


Figure 1:
Understanding the reading process as it applies to a typical ESL class in a California Community College.
Adapted from Pal².

¹ Jean Berko Gleason, Nan Bernstein Ratner, Gleason Berko and Glea Berko: *Psycholinguistics* (International Thomson, 1997)
Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994)
Kenneth Goodman, *On Reading: A Common-Sense Look at the Nature of Language and the Science of Reading* (Heinemann, 1996).
Stephen Krashen, *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom* (Prentice Hall, 1996).

² Anasuya Pal: "Reading in a Second/Foreign Language — A Conceptual Appraisal". *The ESPecialist*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 1-24 (1989).

advanced comprehension — no matter whether the target language is L₁ or L₂. Here, simple comprehension implies the ability to follow the instructions available either in an instruction manual or “online”. Advanced comprehension involves “reacting” to the reading text, on the other hand, in order to analyze and dissect the text and retrieve the information from it. In terms of the modern workplace, this implies being able to understand the written or “online” instructions and solve the problems or design new formats, with or without the templates as the case may be. Reading is a *psycholinguistic guessing game*, therefore, in the words Kenneth Goodman³ had first used to describe this process more than three decades ago.

In practice, though, many of the jobs now available seldom call for any advanced level of literacy beyond the associate degree and many of the workers manning these jobs may not have any literacy in the native language itself. In such cases, understanding the written instructions involves literal translation from L₂ to the L₁. Ironically, this is also where culture plays a crucial role, at the same time when globalization and the advances in communication technology are transferring many of the service jobs across the borders. Learning and teaching to read, without which we can hardly advance to the writing skill, is not always the same in L₁ as in L₂, therefore. Table 1 summarizes their similarities and differences.

Table 1: Similarities and differences between reading in L₁ versus L₂

<u>Similarities:</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Reading in both the contexts (L₁ and L₂) requires the knowledge of content, formal and linguistic schema. — Reading is an “information-retrieval” process that involves interaction between the reader and the text.
<u>Differences:</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — As L₂ is acquired after L₁, the latter may be more firmly developed than the former, so limiting the competence in the target language. — The linguistic base of L₂ may be syntactically, phonetically, semantically, and rhetorically different from that of L₁. — The L₂ reader may have the linguistic competence and skills but has not honed the sociocultural skills sufficiently in order to perceive texts in a culturally authentic and specific way whereas the end result, comprehension, is based on linguistic data.

Adapted from Singhal⁴

Clearly, an efficient L₂ reader is one who not only has the linguistic skills in L₂ but has also acquired the necessary sociocultural dexterity to be equally comfortable in moving from one cultural scene to another. As for the instructor teaching a mixed class like our ENGL 015 or ENGL 101 at SBVC, these differences between the L₁ and L₂ reading processes can produce the pedagogic nightmares that are designed to limit the effectiveness of teaching, and therefore impair instructional performance. As for ENGL 101, though, the hope is that most of the ESL students would have refined their sociocultural skills by the time they have completed ENGL 015. The question is whether this would apply to the ENGL 015 class as well.

³ Kenneth Goodman, *The Psycholinguistic Nature of the Reading Process* (Wayne State Univ. Press, 1968).

⁴ Meena Singhal, “A Comparison of L1 and L2 Reading: Cultural Differences and Schema”. *The Internet TESL Journal* (<http://iteslj.org>), vol. 4, no. 10 (1998).