Reviewed work:

Reading and Adult English Language Learners: A Review of the Research. (2003). Miriam Burt, Joy Kreeft Peyton and Rebecca Adams. Washington D.C.: CAL, Center for Applied Linguistics and National Center for ESL Literacy Education. Pp. 46. ISBN: NCL-9658-RAELL2. $12.95

Reviewed by:
Angela S. Y. Loo
Macquarie University

This review discusses a volume that is itself a review and an annotated bibliography of research on reading development for adults learning English. This volume is especially useful for practitioners, graduate students, researchers and policy makers, for it provides an understanding about (a) what is known about how adult English language learners learn to read in English; (b) the types of activities that facilitate this process and (c) what still needs to be researched. The book is divided into four sections: (1) Factors Influencing Adult Literacy Development in English; (2) the Process of Learning to Read in a Second Language; (3) Reading to Learn; and (4) Summary of Findings and Implications for Practice and Research. I find the book very well-organised, structured with cogent headings and well worth a read as a quick reference to the recent research conducted on reading strategies employed by adult English language learners.

In Section 1 (pp. 8-9), Burt, Peyton and Adams refer to studies conducted on preliterate and semi-literate learners, and emphasize the fact that it is important to examine the value of native language literacy instruction prior to or at the same time as the learning of English literacy. In addition, the authors suggest (quite reasonably) that learners who are highly literate in their first language (L1) and who also have high levels of second language (L2) proficiency will be more likely to transfer their L1 reading strategies to L2 reading, though teachers should not assume that the transfer of literacy skills will occur automatically. This section also explores learner goals, explaining that learning is most productive when the material that students study is relevant to real-life needs and goals. The authors claim that there is little research on this issue (p. 22). However, I would draw attention to the study by Haneda and Wells (2000: 430-452) as an example of such research. Carrying out a study with the Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP), the researchers presented examples of writing functioning as a means of knowledge building. They compared the effects of allowing grade three students to collaborate when working on their self-chosen projects as against those that required them to engage in pre-set cooperative learning tasks. The findings showed that compared to texts written during previous cooperative learning activities, the written reports of the self-chosen projects had better-developed themes and showed a clearer sense of audience awareness.

Section 2 summarises models that describe the reading process. The section presents reading models that may underpin processes by learners with prior literacy experiences. It then describes specific skills involved in reading. The section gives a brief description of the following models: bottom-up, top-down, interactive, and learners' internal models. This description is useful to readers who want to gain an initial idea of what the various reading models constitute. Though the authors do not point out the pros and cons of each model, they do suggest that phonological and orthographic decoding skills should be taught directly, especially for readers with non-Roman alphabetic literacy. In addition, the authors argue in favor of mixing activities that draw attention to accurate meaning with those that focus on meaning in the text (e.g., reading Dear Abby letters and asking learners to give their own views to letter writers).

On a separate note, the authors identify the levels of processing in reading as (a) phonological processing; (b) vocabulary recognition; (c) syntactic processing, (d) schema activating. Under the section on phonological processing, the authors mention that phonemic relationships are connections between sounds and letters that represent them, while morphophonemic relationships are connections between morphemes; i.e., units that signal meaning, such as past tense markings and letters. They rightly employ an example: "teachers can point out that while the regular past tense has different pronunciations depending on the phonological structure of the verb, past tense morphology for regular English verbs has only one written form, -ed (e.g., jump<u>ed</u>, jamm<u>ed</u>, land<u>ed</u>)." One additional issue worth contending here is that apart from -ed being represented as an orthographical form of the past tense, it is also an orthographical form of the -en morpheme used for the perfect tense (e.g., has lied, has landed, etc. in contrast with has risen, has given).

In Section 3, the authors espouse the benefits of reading in a foreign language not only for the understanding of the topic, but also for the learning of the language. Readers are more likely to learn about the language when there is a finite number of unfamiliar vocabulary items which are likely to occur frequently, i.e., since these items appear often, readers become familiar with them and are more likely to learn them. It is also mentioned that some research points to a strong relationship between second language reading ability and writing ability (Carson, Carrell, Silberstein and Kuehn, 1990). They encourage teachers to identify a wider range of topics outside the classroom that are relevant to the interests of the students to help them acquire these useful resources on reading. I would agree with the view that when students' personal feelings and interests are engaged, they are motivated to write better. Notwithstanding this, the authors could also suggest forms of research that compare writing ability in which students' extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are engaged. Section Four, the final section in the book, provides a summary of the findings and discusses the implications for practice and research.

While this book is published in 2003, the authors do not mention the notion of scaffolding of reading as an important focus of recent reading research. One good example of such research is Donato (1994) whose studies are reported in *Collective Scaffolding in Second Language Learning*. Another excellent example would be *Building Research in Language and Literacy* by Love et al. (2001). The latter introduces the concept of scaffolding in reading, referring to recent strategies for both L1 and L2 learners of chunking reading into more manageable bits and asking questions while reading small parts of text so that the mind stays focused on the reading activity.

If I were new to the area of reading research, I would appreciate the various models briefly and concisely described, such that one can gain an immediate understanding of the basic theories. If I were a busy teacher, I would better comprehend the emotional difficulties and psychological barriers to effective reading faced by an adult ESL learner. Finally, if I were a student attempting to improve my reading strategies, I would not self-criticise and abandon my goals of reading easily simply. I would be encouraged by the fact that one's reading ability improves as a result of choosing more interesting and engaging topics, and therefore feel good about accepting and improving my reading ability by choosing topics that are interesting and relevant. Hence, notwithstanding the fact that research could be updated on areas such as scaffolding studies, I believe that the goals of this book are indeed well met and realised.

REFERENCES

Carson, J. E., Carrell, P. L., Silberstein, S., & Kuehn, P. (1990). Reading-writing relationships in first and second language. *TESOL Quarterly,* 24, 245-266.

Donato, R. (1994). Collective scaffolding in second language learning. In J. P. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research* (pp. 33-56). Norwood, NJ: Aplex.

Haneda, M. & Wells, G. (2000). Writing in Knowledge-Building Communities. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 34, 430-453.

Love, K., Pigdon, K., Baker, G., & Hamston, J. (2001). *BUILT: Building understanding in literacy and language.* Australia: The University of Melbourne.