



Reviewed work:

*Teaching Second Language Reading*. (2007). Thom Hudson. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 350. ISBN 9780194422833. \$26.75

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*Teaching Second Language Reading* by Thom Hudson purports, according to the back-cover description, to be “a useful handbook for both beginning and experienced teachers who want to improve their practical strategies in teaching second language reading and their understanding of the reading process.”

During my career as a teacher of English as a foreign language to students ranging from elementary to university level, I would certainly have rejoiced at the discovery of such a book. I would have been particularly attracted to the claim on the back cover that the book would explore in detail the myriad approaches, strategies, and methods used to teach reading. From a classroom teacher’s point of view, it would have seemed that at last I was being provided with a veritable manual on how to tackle the very complex and challenging task for second language teachers, experienced or otherwise, of teaching reading.

Unfortunately, the publisher’s blurb is at odds with the core content of the book. The reader encounters not so much a “handbook” (to use the actual term in the blurb) brimming with practical hints and evidence of what works in second language reading classrooms, but rather something akin to an extensive literature review of research studies conducted on multiple aspects of the reading process.

In order to gain a more accurate sense of the book's contents, one would be better off starting at the back, where a perusal of the bibliography reveals 38 pages of cited sources, 471 entries, to be exact. This, in my opinion, is where the true significance of the book lies: for in analysing, condensing, and collating decades' worth of reading research studies, Hudson gives readers a chronological overview of the development of reading research, thereby enabling them to identify the emergence and growth of key research trends in the field. The studies cited range from approaches as diverse as Carroll's (1964, p. 62) *bottom-up* view of reading as "the activity of reconstructing ... a reasonable spoken message from a printed text" to the *new literacy* approaches that view the act of reading as an inherently social practice embedded in specific contexts, discourses, and positions (Street, 1993; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996).

That is not to say that the book does not attempt to address instructional issues. Hudson does present implications for instruction in response to the different research findings. However, these are made explicit only in chapters relating to strategies and metacognitive skills (chapter 5), formal schema (chapter 7), and the relationship between reading and writing (chapter 10). Also, the instructional implications are often inconclusive in nature, such as "several studies at different levels of instruction have indicated that first language instruction in text structure can be effective in teaching discourse organisation" (p. 192). Otherwise, readers are left to sift through the summaries and conclusions of each chapter to identify any significant suggestions for classroom practice. While this may well be a function of the book's design and organisation of content, it could be argued that a book marketed as a tool to help teachers to reflect on and improve their teaching methods would be enhanced by foregrounding the implications for instruction that may be drawn from the relevant research.

In the same vein, the discussion activities and questions at the end of each chapter, while useful in inviting readers to reflect on their own reading activities and their comprehension of the research studies presented, seem to bear little relevance to concrete classroom practice. For example, at the end of chapter 8 on genre and contrastive rhetoric, the reader is asked, "How does Swales relate the six defining characteristics to be sufficient for identifying people as members of discourse communities to the five criterial observations about genres?" (p. 225). This question seems to have little if any link to the act of teaching reading; a task relating to the application of genre theory and contrastive rhetoric in a typical second language reading classroom would prove more practical for most teachers or teacher trainers.

Hudson structures the book in a way that reflects his view that reading skills can be broadly categorised into word-attack skills (decoding skills), comprehension skills, fluency skills, and critical reading skills. He takes as his point of departure a discussion of the salient issues surrounding second language reading, which comprises a description of the reading process and summarises the key prerequisites for effective reading. In my opinion, this is the most engaging chapter, where the reader is invited to interact with various text types to explore the numerous formats, tasks, and goals involved in the complex act of reading.

Hudson proceeds with a chronological summary of the development of models of first language reading, affording readers a useful framework for the content of the chapters to follow. In chapter 3, he examines the core issues in second language reading and discusses several second

language reading models. He goes on to emphasise the significant differences between first and second language readers, which are crucial to understanding the influence of factors such as first language literacy and age on second language reading performance (p. 290).

In chapter 4, the author critically challenges the conventional view of reading skills as being hierarchically ordered and discrete, putting forward numerous research studies that lend weight to the theory that reading skills are initiated and applied during the act of reading and are heavily influenced by factors such as text purpose and content (p. 79).

In the ensuing chapter on strategies and metacognitive skills, Hudson makes the helpful distinction between strategies as representing either a type of “repair action” (p. 293) or a more subconscious action, such as monitoring and regulation. He cites numerous studies that indicate the benefits of the explicit teaching of strategies and metacognitive skills to students, yet stresses the need to examine such training in context as exemplars of strategy use, rather than presenting them as dislocated lists of strategy types to be tried out on texts that have little significance to students.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal respectively with content and formal schema. In chapter 6, Hudson underscores the importance of the teacher’s role in understanding the cultural background of second language students in order to develop an insight into how this can affect the way in which they extract meaning from a text. Chapter 7 includes a useful and thorough summary of the different types of methodology used to teach text structure. This leads well into the ensuing chapter (chapter 8), which presents an extended discussion of the various teaching methods that have been used to focus on text genre and contrastive rhetoric.

The subject of vocabulary (chapter 9) is approached from three different angles, affording the reader a comprehensive understanding of its role in second language reading. Hudson addresses in some detail the “breadth and depth” dimensions of vocabulary knowledge (p. 235) before going on to cite research studies that explore the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. He then proceeds to explain how, although students can learn new vocabulary both intentionally and incidentally, incidental acquisition requires the learner to experience many different instances of the word; tools such as dictionaries and marginal glosses play a useful role in this regard.

Chapter 10, which discusses the relationships between reading and writing, advocates the combining of reading and writing in the teaching of literacy. This, according to the author, prevents artificial distinctions being made between the two skills and affords the second language student more “cross-learning opportunities” as well as serving to develop critical thinking skills (p. 288).

Chapter 11 ties all of the abovementioned issues together in an extended discussion, which helps the reader to retain an overall perspective of the core issues in second language reading research.

The book is helpful in the way in which it addresses the ambiguity and complexity of terms relating to the teaching of reading. The distinctions, which some may consider inconsequential,

are subtle and potentially confusing, and it is refreshing to encounter an author who tackles them directly, as can be seen in his discussion of the term *skills*:

There is a need to recognise how the term skill is used in multiple ways. The term skills, subskills, processing strategies, ability, and Stanovich's (1980) term, "knowledge sources", are terms used variably in the applied linguistics and language teaching literature. The distinctions in usage can depend upon whether the term is used to refer to a language component or to an individual reader's ability to perform. (p. 78)

Unfortunately, the sheer breadth and scope of research included by Hudson comes in general at the expense of interesting and engaging details pertaining to the individual studies he cites. Where these details are included, they prove to be relevant and illustrative, such as his account of research into how the respective personal knowledge and cultural background of white and African-American eighth grade students in the United States affected their interpretation of a text that dealt with an incidence of violence at a school (p. 144).

As with much literature on reading, Hudson's position with regard to the teaching of learners with very low levels of literacy appears, at times, contradictory. While advocating against the use of synthetic syllabi, saying that activities that isolate and teach unitary skills are problematic in that they fail to take into account the complex nature of reading acts, Hudson goes on to underscore Gordon's (1982) assertion that readers need to develop core reading competencies in order to become effective readers. These comprise discrete "prerequisites," such as the names of letters, consonants, plurals, root words, and vowels (p. 292). Understandably, the issue of teaching low-literate adults is a multifaceted one, a detailed explication of which perhaps lies outside of the scope of this book, yet a clear description from the author on where he stands in this regard would have been helpful in the light of increasing numbers of such students emerging in second language classrooms around the world.

It must be acknowledged that Hudson does not attempt to shy away from the complexities of the issues surrounding the process of second language reading in order to present a more coherent read for his audience. This allows him to illustrate how the process of reading involves the coordination of a number of factors, such as grapheme recognition, phonological representation, syntactic structure, background knowledge, processing strategies, text structure understanding, vocabulary, and context. The confounding, complex and ultimately very human science of reading is perhaps best encapsulated in Hudson's somewhat desultory conclusion that "we are left knowing that there is no magic bullet, no single explanation for what teachers can do to ensure that their students learn to read in a second or foreign language" (p. 297).

There can be no doubt that anyone navigating the complex and often conflicting body of literature available on reading research will find Hudson's comprehensive documentation and lucid explanations of research methodology and findings extremely valuable. However, it is questionable whether teachers or teacher trainers seeking concrete and direct guidance on teaching strategies and methods would find this a useful handbook. Ultimately, for this reader, the book fails to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

## References

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