



<http://www.prenhall.com>

Reviewed work:

Reading Skills for College Students (7th ed.). (2007).
Ophelia H. Hancock. Upper Saddle Rivers, NJ: Prentice
Hall. Pp. 469. ISBN 0132208121. \$70.00

Reviewed by
Zhijun Wen
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
United States

No one denies the importance of strong reading skills, especially for college and graduate students who often have to complete extremely long readings each week. Inexperienced students are sometimes overwhelmed by their intimidating reading assignments. Reading proficiency is undoubtedly crucial to academic success, and students definitely need guidance and practice in order to become efficient readers. *Reading Skills for College Students* offers some advice and practice which may help these students achieve their goals.

The textbook is designed to help college students develop advanced English reading abilities. It consists of three parts; the first two parts constitute the main body of the textbook. Part 1 aims to help students develop basic reading skills, such as building vocabulary, finding main ideas, reading for detail, drawing inferences, reading critically, and increasing reading speed. It is 13 chapters long. The first chapter gives some general advice on study skills, such as how to manage time well, how to make effective study plans, and how to find learning resources. Chapters 2–13 deal with 12 major reading skills, with each chapter focusing on a different skill. Each skill is accompanied by one to four exercises. Part 2 attempts to familiarize students with six major subject areas: literature, history, psychology, biology, computer science and data processing, and business. Each subject area spans one chapter, which is also accompanied by exercises for consolidating the skills taught in Part 1 and for testing comprehension. Each chapter from the first two parts ends with suggestions for further study. Part 3 provides 15 supplementary reading passages for honing the reading skills and for expanding background knowledge. Each selection is followed by vocabulary and comprehension exercises.

According to Hancock, the book is intended to foster college students' general reading skills and enable them to enjoy reading. I am not in a position to assess whether people can achieve these goals by using this book because that would require longitudinal studies. In this review, I will examine the basic principles and underlying theoretical assumptions on which Hancock's methodology is based.

Hancock's theoretical assumptions are consistent with the interactive approach to reading. On the one hand, he assumes that reading is a bottom-up process, which involves building up meaning from text. This assumption can be inferred from his perspective on what constrains students' reading speed. He writes that good readers perceive several words during one fixation of the eyes and that vocalizing or subvocalizing each word slows the reading process. These claims indicate that he is primarily concerned with low-level decoding processes in tackling the issue of reading speed. On the other hand, Hancock takes it for granted that context, prior knowledge, and schemata play important roles in reading. He devotes a large portion of the textbook to teaching different subject areas and to providing background information. This reveals that his approach to reading also subsumes top-down ingredients.

As for the relationship among different reading skills, Hancock assumes that they are separable. This can be seen from how he handles them in his book. Altogether, he teaches 12 separate reading skills: making use of contextual clues, using word structural knowledge (root words, prefixes, and suffixes), developing dictionary skills, reading for main ideas, finding details, using signal words, understanding organizational patterns (comparison-contrast, cause-effect, etc.), understanding purpose and tone, drawing inferences, reading critically, understanding graphs, and increasing reading rate. This way of handling the reading skills may result from practical pedagogical necessities. For example, organizing activities around a separate skill makes the teaching objectives narrower and easier to assess. The reading skills fall into five broader categories: vocabulary (using contextual clues, word structure knowledge, and dictionary skills), comprehension (reading for main ideas, finding details, using signal words, understanding organizational patterns, understanding purpose and tone, and drawing inferences), critical reading, graph reading, and speed reading skills. This categorization of reading skills is compatible with the current trends in reading research, which favor broad categories such as word-attack, comprehension, fluency, and critical reading skills (Hudson, 2007, p. 103). Of course, Hancock does not start from word-attacking skills. He assumes that college students have already developed low-level processing skills such as letter recognition.

However, despite this assumption, many international students who are studying in English-speaking countries are not native speakers of English. For many of these students, low-level processing ability in their second language (L2) is still a major concern, because automaticity of lower-level processing abilities is essential to efficient reading comprehension. According to Perfetti's (1985, 1988, 1991) verbal efficiency theory, automaticity of local text processes is the most important prerequisite of reading success. If lexical access is not automatic, it will tax the attention needed for high-level processing and as a result limit comprehension. Most L2 learners' reading speed is much slower than that of first language (L1) readers. This phenomenon is well documented in studies on L2 online sentence processing (Marinis, 2003; Papadopoulou, 2005), which reveal that L2 learners' local text processes are not automatic.

Hancock does not say explicitly whether the book is designed for native speakers of English or learners of English as a second language (ESL). It can certainly be used as a textbook for ESL learners, but it obviously does not address ESL learners' concerns and their language backgrounds. Reading research has demonstrated that different orthographies require different decoding strategies (Hudson, 2007). For example, Chinese and Japanese writing systems are logographic, and readers of such languages may use direct visual-meaning mapping rather than the phoneme-grapheme correspondences that are commonly used by readers of alphabetic writing systems such as English. Koda's (1992, 1997, 1999) studies showed that low-level L1 processing routines are often transferred to L2. According to Hudson, inappropriate transfer of L1 visual processing routines impedes L2 reading comprehension (p. 96). Thus, textbooks for effective training of L2 reading must consider L1 background.

In addition to failing to address ESL learners' concerns, Hancock's handling of the reading activities is also unsatisfactory. Most of the exercises are like items in reading tests, which require nothing but accurate answers. Almost none of the exercises in the book are designed to engage readers in interactive and communicative activities. In fact, effective reading requires readers to actively interact with the text. According to Pearson and Tierney (1984), effective reading calls for the reader to actively negotiate meaning with the author. Readers should anticipate, plan, compose, edit, and monitor the message as they read it. The book fails to include any such activities. On the other hand, the book devotes a large proportion of the exercises to building vocabulary. It is easy to see that Hancock considers vocabulary to be the most important factor in determining reading success. However, reading is certainly not confined to acquisition of new vocabulary, although reading and academic success do indeed presuppose a large vocabulary.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that Hancock treats reading as a skill separate from other language skills such as writing. None of the reading exercises in the book include writing activities. However, L2 researchers widely agree that the four language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are not really separable. It is doubtful whether teaching them separately will be fruitful.

Hancock's *Reading Skills for College Students* is intended to help students gain confidence in reading. Its underlying assumptions about reading processes and reading skills are compatible with the general principles of current reading theories. Overall, however, the book fails to address ESL learners' concerns and lacks interactive and communicative exercises. Hancock's decision to treat reading as a skill separate from other language skills is also questionable.

References

- Hudson, T. (2007). *Teaching second language reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Koda, K. (1992). The effects of lower-level processing skills on FL reading performance: Implications for instruction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 76, 502–512.

- Koda, K. (1997). Orthographic knowledge in L2 lexical processing: A cross-linguistic perspective. In J. Coady & T. N. Huckin (Eds.), *Second language vocabulary acquisition* (pp. 35–52). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Koda, K. (1999). Development of L2 intraword orthographic sensitivity and decoding skills. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83, 51–64.
- Marinis, T. (2003). Psycholinguistic techniques in second language acquisition research. *Second Language Research*, 19, 144–161.
- Papadopoulou, D. (2005). Reading-time studies of second language ambiguity resolution. *Second Language Research*, 21, 98–120.
- Pearson, P. D., & Tierney, R. J. (1984). On becoming a thoughtful reader: Learning to read like a writer. In A. C. Purves & O. S. Niles (Eds.), *Becoming readers in a complex society* (pp. 144–173). Chicago, IL: National Society of the Study of Education.
- Perfetti, C. A. (1985). *Reading ability*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Perfetti, C. A. (1988). Verbal efficiency in reading ability. In G. E. MacKinnon, T. G. Waller, & M. Daneman (Eds.), *Reading research: Advances in theory and practice* (Vol. 6, pp. 109–143). New York: Academic Press.
- Perfetti, C. A. (1991). Representations and awareness in the acquisition of reading competence. In L. Rieben & C. A. Perfetti (Eds.), *Learning to read: Basic research and its implications* (pp. 33–44). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

About the Reviewer

Zhijun Wen is a PhD student in the Department of Second Language Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. He is interested in bilingualism, cognition in second language acquisition, connectionist modeling, corpus linguistics, cross-linguistic processing, generative approach to SLA, psycholinguistics, sentence processing, speech perception, statistics, and testing. His current research concentrates on second language processing and second language reading.
E-mail: zhijun@hawaii.edu