



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs

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FACTORS INFLUENCING READING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Competence in reading involves a variety of simultaneously interacting processes. For learners of English as a second or other language, these processes are further complicated by a range of additional considerations involving knowledge and use of print in the primary language (L1), degree of oral language proficiency in English, and background knowledge. This *Bulletin* is devoted to exploring these and other important factors which impact the ability of language minority learners to obtain meaning from print at various levels of reading ability. Teaching suggestions are also discussed.

FACTOR 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE L1 ORTHOGRAPHY.

Orthography is the symbolic written system of a language. It may be *alphabetic*, based on sound and symbol correspondences, such as in English, Spanish, or Somali; it may be *syllabic*, based on consonant/vowel sound combinations as in Thai, or Japanese; or it may be *logographic*, based on ideograms or characters such as in Chinese or Korean. Language orthographies can have various directionalities: they may be left to right, as in English or French; right to left, as in Arabic or Farsi; or up and down, as in Chinese and Japanese. Punctuation usage may also differ with

various orthographies: different punctuation can be used such as accent marks, and familiar punctuation such as commas and semi-colons can be used differently for clarifying and prioritizing ideas.

Teaching Suggestions: The ability of learners to decode English orthography will vary according to the similarities or differences with their L1 orthography. This will have an impact on the way in which learners problem-solve unfamiliar words, as well as the way in which they interact with familiar words. Consistent, contextualized, meaningful print immersion on topics being discussed is an important instructional strategy.

FACTOR 2: LITERACY BACKGROUND OF THE LEARNER.

For older learners, L1 literacy influences the speed and manner of reading development in English. Essentially, if the learner knows how to read in the primary language, that ability is transferrable to English. The learner only needs to learn the code of English orthography, since the underlying ability to extract meaning from print has already been learned in another language. Conversely, not knowing how to read in L1 means a great deal of additional instructional time and effort to acquire this skill.

A second aspect of the learner's literacy background is the general meaning and use of literacy in the culture of origin. How important is literacy for communication? What are the purposes of reading and writing? How critically do readers attend to print meaning? The answers to these questions may vary considerably from one culture to another. This will have an impact on attitudes in reading English.

Related to the learner's cultural attitude towards literacy is the learner's specific home environment regarding uses of reading. Learners from a background with little or no involvement with print may not attach the same degree of importance towards reading as learners from families whose daily involvement with print is ongoing and consistent, such as in religious worship or in professional occupations.

Teaching Suggestions: Obtain as much background information as possible to determine previous attitudes and involvement with reading in English and in L1. Create an informal reading questionnaire to obtain current attitudes and practices towards reading. Learn as much as possible about the general attitudes toward reading in the learner's culture of origin.

FACTOR 3: PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH.

Native speakers of English generally have at least five years of experience in oral English language use before reading; second language English readers will, in all likelihood, have only superficial oral English fluency as they begin learning to read. Lack of oral language proficiency has an enormous impact on a learner's ability to: 1) connect the printed word with oral knowledge and use of it; 2) understand concepts in print as they are related to oral language use; and 3) predict what will be encountered in print from experience with the oral English language pattern.

Teaching Suggestions: Maintain an integrated approach to reading and engage students in oral use of language surrounding the topic that is being read. Pay close attention to uses of content related vocabulary. Be especially aware of the uses of connectors, that is, words to conjoin, to negate, or to subordinate ideas with each other in

texts. Learners may have difficulty comprehending them.

FACTOR 4: APPROPRIATE USE OF READING MATERIAL

There are several considerations operating in meaningful reading of texts: the grammatical and lexical complexity of the language; familiarity with the format in which the text is organized; background knowledge the learner brings to comprehending the content of the text; and the degree to which there are accompanying visual aids and other organizers to assist in comprehension. A learner's familiarity and use of oral and written language is a key component to meaningful reading, and there are several strategies which can be employed to help learners comprehend text.

Teaching Suggestions: Preview texts to determine language, vocabulary and cultural patterns which may be confusing or incomprehensible. Create mini-lessons focusing on use of these aspects of language and culture as part of instruction. For content-specific subjects, *teach the text backwards*, i.e., engage learners in activities, using related vocabulary, asking key questions and highlighting key concepts *prior to* having learners read the complete text. Create or have learners create graphic organizers to assist in comprehending the essential aspects of the reading.

CONCLUSION

Multiple factors influence reading in another language. Influences vary according to the nature of primary language, attitude toward reading, oral English fluency, and background knowledge. With investigation into the learner's background and a better understanding of how language works, teachers can provide ongoing and timely support through integrated oral and written instruction.

SOURCE:

Jameson, Judy. (1998) "Teaching the Text Backwards: A Practical Framework That Helps English Language Learners Understand Textbooks." Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.