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978-0-521-72974-1 - Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice

William Grabe

Frontmatter

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# Reading in a Second Language

## Moving from Theory to Practice

*William Grabe*

Northern Arizona University

This title was published under the series editorship of  
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*To my sisters, Marion, Dot, and Linda*

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## *Series editors' preface*

As much has been written about reading and reading instruction as perhaps any issue in education, and attempting to synthesize this large body of theory and research, as well as explore its implications for the pedagogy of reading instruction, is a Herculean task. Bill Grabe, however, is one scholar whose knowledge of the field of first and second language reading theory and instruction is second to none, and in this book he draws on a long and active career as a researcher and applied linguist to survey what is known about the nature of both first and second language reading and examine the implications of this research for reading instruction. In the process he provides a fascinating and broad ranging view of the state of knowledge in reading theory, and draws on this body of knowledge to draw implications for the teaching of second language reading.

Grabe points out that the starting point for our understanding of L2 reading is an understanding of what has been learned from L1 reading research, and that much of the literature of L2 reading instruction is based on applying what has been learned from L1 research. Grabe leads the reader through a wide range of reading theories and reading research, highlighting findings from L1 research that are of most relevance to L2 reading instruction. At the same time issues specific to L2 reading are also given due prominence, including differences between L1 and L2 reading, the role of transfer in L2 reading, and the interaction of L1 and L2 reading resources in L2 reading.

Central to this book is a comprehensive examination of the complex cognitive processes that readers employ when they read. Grabe shows how implicit and explicit learning, attention, noticing, and consciousness, as well as contextual and background knowledge, are critical to an understanding of the role of cognition in reading comprehension. The role that memory plays in reading is also emphasized, and text and situation models of reading comprehension are used to explain higher levels of reading comprehension. From an examination of the basic cognitive process of reading, Grabe then discusses a number of models of reading that provide a framework for organizing and explaining the nature of reading.



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Moving beyond a cognitive perspective on reading, this book also examines sociocultural factors in reading, including how factors such as the learner's home environment, socioeconomic status, identity, home language use, as well as a range of ethnic and community factors, can influence literacy development.

Throughout this book some relatively familiar aspects of reading are revisited and updated in the light of current theory and research, such as the nature of reading skills and reading strategies, the role of vocabulary, and the nature of reading fluency. In addition, many new aspects of reading are presented, such as the contribution of motivation to reading ability and performance and the role of discourse-level information in reading. Of particular interest to those interested in L2 reading pedagogy will be the author's discussion of implications for curriculum development and reading assessment.

The challenge for a scholar attempting to examine a field as broad and complex as the field of reading and reading instruction is to tell a story that is engaging, informative, relevant, and above all, readable. Bill Grabe has succeeded admirably in this endeavor, producing a book that will appeal to a wide range of readers, including researchers interested in L1 and L2 reading theory, graduate students and others interested in the nature of reading, as well as curriculum developers and teachers involved in developing reading courses and reading materials.

Carol A. Chapelle and Susan Hunston

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## *Preface*

The subtitle of this book captures its focus: moving from theory to practice. Writing a book about the impact and implications of reading theory on second-language (L2) reading instruction means that a number of alternative perspectives are not developed in the book. So, at the outset, I will say that this book is not primarily a survey of existing L2 reading research and what it has uncovered about L2 reading abilities. Two excellent recent publications already exist on the topic: Hudson (2007) and Koda (2005, see also the 2007 update) outline in detail L2 reading research. When envisioning this book, I wanted to focus more on what teachers and curriculum developers could do with information about reading and reading development to improve L2 reading instruction. At the moment, I am not convinced that synthesizing L2 reading research, by itself, would lead more clearly toward that goal. One consequence of this orientation is that the book is heavily oriented to English first-language (L1) reading research.

The book has a second goal that follows from the first. It focuses on explanations for how fluent reading works and how research on reading can be used to promote reading development. At present, I know of no current L2 reading book that attempts to explain in detail how reading comprehension works as a unified process and that also explores instructional implications and effective teaching practices. Teachers need to have a good sense of how fluent reading works if they are to understand key implications from research as well as the range of instructional assertions made about what will improve reading comprehension. Again, a consequence of this second goal is that the book is heavily influenced by L1 reading research.

At the same time, the book does not take the final steps in moving from theory to practice. The final steps would involve highlighting L2 instructional applications that describe day-to-day instruction or the scope and sequence of a reading textbook series. A good example of this is seen in the work of Neil Anderson, in which a teacher-training framework (Anderson, 1999) is translated explicitly into an L2 reading textbook series (Anderson 2007–2008).

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In pursuing the above goals, I have explored how reading, not just L2 reading, works. Research on L2 reading is often developed from research that is L1-based. But this is not always the case, as research on L1 transfer effects, the bilingual lexicon, and learning with a two-language system have shown (see especially Chapter 7). Moreover, L2 reading research on extensive reading and vocabulary learning have made important independent contributions to understanding L2 reading development (Chapters 13 and 15). Perhaps most clearly, applied linguists have made major contributions to understanding the nature of written text structure and its potential impact on reading abilities (Chapter 12). Having noted all these L2 contributions, it nonetheless remains the case that much L2 reading research represents extensions from issues and developments initially explored in L1 reading research. There is nothing wrong with this research evolution for L2 reading. As I note in the closing chapter, there is no such thing as true replication, and if the goal is to understand similarities and differences across L1 and L2 groups of learners, similar research efforts need to be carried out in both L1 and L2 contexts. One obvious contrast that arises from these types of research comparisons is the greater role that language proficiency plays in L2 reading comprehension (whereas in L1 reading comprehension, conceptual background knowledge is likely to play the greater role) (see Koda, 2005). Such research comparisons also highlight the unique demands on L2 reading development – learning to read with two language systems operating in the learner’s mind.

The book is organized into four parts. The first part outlines the cognitive foundations for understanding how reading works. Chapters 1 to 3 provide the basic explanations, while Chapters 4 and 5 expand cognitive concepts underlying reading abilities and explore various models of reading. The second part examines variations in reading abilities. Some of these variations are due to L1–L2 relationships (Chapters 6 and 7), while other sources of variation are due to social-context factors and student motivation for reading (Chapters 8 and 9). The third part of the book highlights the development of L2 reading comprehension abilities, addressing the major requirements for becoming a fluent reader (grammar knowledge, main-idea comprehension, strategic reading, awareness of discourse structure, and vocabulary knowledge; Chapters 10 to 13). The fourth part expands on skills and instruction that develop the fluent reader, addressing fluency, extensive reading, and curriculum development. The fourth part also addresses reading-assessment options as well as ways of making assessment practices an important facet of learning to read (Chapters 14 to 17). The book closes with a final chapter that considers additional issues and alternative conceptions of reading abilities (Chapter 18).

I have planned this book for at least two audiences. I hope that researchers, teacher trainers, curriculum developers, and anyone

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interested in L2 reading will want to read all the book chapters. I also want the book to be relatively accessible to students in graduate programs and intrepid teachers wanting to know more about reading and how to improve reading instruction. For teachers and graduate students looking for a more streamlined explanation, a theoretical foundation can be built from Chapters 1 to 3. Core ideas for developing reading comprehension abilities can be found in Chapters 10 through 13. Expanding reading abilities beyond general comprehension to develop fluent L2 readers is addressed further in Chapters 14 to 16 (and also Chapter 9). I hope that this recognition of two potential audiences will help readers determine how to use the book most productively.

In writing this book, I have been encouraged by a number of people who did not let me slip behind on the project, even when so many other opportunities beckon during a sabbatical year. I need to thank first my colleague-spouse, Fredricka Stoller, for encouraging me daily and not letting me lose sight of my goals for the book. I also need to thank, in particular, Kathleen Corley at Cambridge University Press, who did not give up on me, even as I found excuses every year for putting off the project. I also want to thank a number of colleagues who read one or more chapters and gave me very helpful feedback, even while pointing out many places where I was treading on thin ice or needed to rethink my assertions and bold claims. These willing commenters include Neil Anderson, Nick Ellis, Mary Enright, Dee Gardner, Keiko Koda, Dick Schmidt, and Fredricka Stoller. Most likely I did not fix everything that they pointed out to me in ways that would have made them feel happy with my interpretation, but the book, nonetheless, was made much better by their comments. Aside from their willingness to look at chapters in this book, I have learned immensely from each of them as colleagues and as scholars who push the envelope on L2 learning and cognition, L2 reading development, and L2 reading instruction. I was also helped in sometimes unexpected ways by some of my graduate students who are currently working on various aspects of L2 reading and reading instruction: Eun Hee Jeon, Xiangying Jiang, and Reiko Komiyama. Finally, I am fortunate to work in an applied linguistics program that has nothing but supportive colleagues operating at the highest levels of academic professionalism. Their intellectual curiosity and academic drive help keep me going.

I hope that this book turns out to be as stimulating for readers as it has been for me to write. I have learned a lot about reading in the process and I hope that the book conveys some of the excitement I have felt in rethinking concepts and in discovering new and innovative ideas about reading and reading instruction. But throughout this process, one thing has remained constant – we only learn to read by reading.

William Grabe