

## Reading in a Second Language

Understanding reading abilities and their development is fundamental for language comprehension and human cognition. Now in its second edition, this book draws on research from multiple disciplines to explain reading abilities in both L1 and L2, and shows how this research can be applied in practice in order to support reading development. Research into reading has progressed a great deal since the first edition was published, so this edition has been completely updated and revised in order to reflect these advances. All chapters present updated research studies, and completely new chapters are included on the neurocognition of reading, reading–writing relationships, and digital reading. If you want to know how reading works, no matter the language(s) involved, as well as how it can be taught effectively, this book provides a persuasive research foundation and many practical insights. It is essential reading for academic researchers and students in Applied Linguistics and TESOL.

William Grabe is Emeritus Regents Professor of Applied Linguistics at Northern Arizona University (NAU). He has been exploring research on reading comprehension, reading development, and reading instruction for over forty years. He was President of AAAL from 2001 to 2002, and Vice President for Research at NAU from 2012 to 2017.

Junko Yamashita is Professor at the Graduate School of Humanities, Nagoya University, Japan. Her main research areas are second-language reading and lexical processing. Her work has appeared in research articles, book chapters, and a co-edited book *Reading to Learn in a Foreign Language* (2019). One of her collaborative papers received the fourth J-CHAT Best Paper Award (2012).

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
 978-1-108-84010-1 — Reading in a Second Language  
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# Reading in a Second Language

## Moving from Theory to Practice

Second Edition

*William Grabe*

*Northern Arizona University*

*Junko Yamashita*

*Nagoya University*

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-108-84010-1 — Reading in a Second Language  
William Grabe, Junko Yamashita  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108840101](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108840101)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108878944

First edition © Cambridge University Press 2009

Second edition © William Grabe and Junko Yamashita 2022

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First published 2009

Second edition 2022

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Grabe, William, author. | Yamashita, Junko (Professor), author.

Title: Reading in a second language : moving from theory to practice / William Grabe, Junko Yamashita.

Description: Second edition. | Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2022. | Series: The Cambridge applied linguistics series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021060330 (print) | LCCN 2021060331 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781108840101 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108878944 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Language and languages – Study and teaching. | Reading. | Second language acquisition.

Classification: LCC P53.75 .G73 2022 (print) | LCC P53.75 (ebook) |

DDC 418/.4071–dc23/eng/20220207

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021060330>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021060331>

ISBN 978-1-108-84010-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-79370-4 Paperback

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*For Dot, Linda, Marshall, Mikiko, Tak, David, and Diane  
Bill Grabe*

*Dedicated to Toshiyuki and Yoshie  
Junko Yamashita*

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-108-84010-1 — Reading in a Second Language  
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978-1-108-84010-1 — Reading in a Second Language  
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Frontmatter  
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## Preface

This second edition of *Reading in a Second Language* is different from the first edition but also a direct continuation. We are happy to report that the general findings of research informing reading comprehension and reading development are essentially the same as the interpretations of research in the first edition. At the same time, there are new chapters in the second edition that reflect changing perspectives and priorities over the past fourteen years. Certain chapters have been slimmed down to provide room for these additions. Perhaps more importantly, new research has altered our own views on the roles of background knowledge, implicit learning, orthographic and syntactic processing, automaticity and the speed of word-to-text processing, amount of reading (or extensive reading), and the larger relationship between linguistic theory and language acquisition. Despite these changes from the first to the second edition, the goals remain the same as for the first edition, using research findings to describe reading comprehension skills and inform reading instruction.

The subtitle of this book captures its focus: *moving from theory to practice*. Writing a book about the impact and implications of reading research on second-language (L2) reading instruction means that a number of alternative perspectives are not developed in the book. So, at the outset, we will say that this book is not primarily a survey of existing L2 reading research and what it has uncovered about L2 reading abilities. Excellent publications already exist on that topic: Chen et al. (2016), Geva and Ramirez (2015), Koda (2005), and Koda and Zehler (2008) outline in detail L2 reading research. When envisioning this book, we wanted to focus as well on what researchers, teachers, and curriculum developers could do with information about reading comprehension and reading development to improve L2 reading instruction. At the moment, we are not convinced that synthesizing L2 reading research, by itself, would lead more clearly toward that goal. One consequence of this orientation is that this second edition remains heavily oriented to English (but not only English) first-language (L1) reading research.

The book has a second goal that follows from the first. This second goal focuses on explanations for how fluent reading works and how research on reading can be used to promote reading development in both L1 and L2 reading contexts. Teachers and teacher trainers 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 step in moving from theory to practice. Such a step would involve highlighting L2 instructional applications that describe day-to-day instruction or the scope and sequence of a reading curriculum. A good example of this is seen in the work of Neil Anderson, in which a teacher-training framework (Anderson, 1999, 2009) is translated explicitly into an L2 reading textbook series (Anderson, 2014–2015).

In pursuing the above goals, we have explored how reading, not just L2 reading, works. We have also sought out research on reading instruction that is most likely to provide evidence for L2 instructional effectiveness. In a number of cases, that goal has meant a focus on L1 research that, so far, has no comparable L2 counterpart. Our intention all along has been to address L2 reading instruction, but the research and instructional training studies of most interest and potential are often L1 based. In many instances, the book does focus on L2 research, often involving experimental studies with instructional treatment groups. So the book discusses L2 reading research and its potential for L2 instruction, but this is not the main focus of the book, nor is it a consistent theme across chapters.

While research on L2 reading is often developed from research that is L1 based, this is not always the case, as research on L1–L2 transfer effects, the bilingual lexicon, and learning with a two-language system have shown (see especially Chapter 8). Moreover, L2 reading research on both extensive reading and vocabulary learning has made important independent contributions to understanding L2 reading development (Chapters 11 and 18). 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 14). Having noted all these L2 contributions, it nonetheless remains 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.

One obvious contrast that arises from these types of research comparisons is the greater role that L2 language proficiency plays in sorting individual differences in L2 reading comprehension (whereas in L1 reading comprehension, conceptual background knowledge is likely to play a somewhat greater role). 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.

In exploring the primary goal of moving from theory to practice in reading, we have made a consistent effort to base instructional implications and teaching suggestions on instructional treatment studies that reveal significant differences between experimental and control groups. We have not always been able to maintain this goal, and the chapters on social contexts, motivation, reading–writing relationships, and extensive reading (Chapters 9, 10, 15, and 18) include a considerable amount of correlational, regression, and meta-analysis evidence to support implications for instruction. Moreover, the chapter on curriculum development and instruction (Chapter 19) summarizes ideas from other chapters and reflects our own interests and experiences with reading instruction.

At the same time, the large majority of the chapters draw implications for instruction from experimental and instructional research studies (assuming experimental and control groups, some type of training period, and pre- and post-treatment assessment). We have tried to limit reliance on case studies, qualitative studies, and recommendations from practitioner knowledge, although some amount of intersection across methods and orientations is not necessarily a bad outcome. Case studies and qualitative research are fine as far as they go, but this book has focused on quantitative research to the extent that this has been possible.

The book is organized into five parts, as shown in the table of contents. The first part outlines the cognitive foundations for understanding how reading works. Chapters 1 to 3 provide the basic explanation, while Chapters 4 to 6 expand cognitive and neurocognitive 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 7 and 8), while other sources of variation are due to social-context factors and student motivation for reading (Chapters 9 and 10). The third part of the book highlights the development of reading

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comprehension abilities, addressing the major requirements for becoming a fluent reader (vocabulary knowledge, grammar knowledge, main idea comprehension, strategic reading, and awareness of discourse structure; Chapters 11 to 14). The fourth part focuses on skills and instruction that examine (a) more advanced reading in relation to writing development, (b) digital contexts for reading development, (c) reading fluency, and (d) extensive reading (also referred to as amount of reading, or exposure to print, in L1 contexts; Chapters 15 to 18). Part five brings together the research from the first four parts in addressing curricular and instructional contexts, and reading assessment practices.

This book has been written for at least two audiences. We hope that researchers, teacher trainers, curriculum developers, and anyone interested in L2 reading will want to read all the chapters. We also want the book to be relatively accessible to graduate students and intrepid teachers wanting to know more about reading and how to improve reading instruction. For teachers and graduate students looking for more streamlined explanations, a theoretical foundation can be built from Chapters 1 to 3. Core ideas for developing reading comprehension abilities can be found in Chapters 10 to 14. Expanding reading abilities beyond general comprehension to develop fluent L2 readers is addressed further in Chapters 15–19. We hope that this recognition of two potential audiences will help readers determine how to use the book most productively.

Unlike the first edition of this book, this edition does not include a closing discussion of further issues to consider. In large part, we have addressed three of these further issues explicitly with three new chapters in this second edition: the role of neurocognitive processing (Chapter 5), the importance of reading–writing relationships (Chapter 15), and the challenges of new digital literacy environments (Chapter 16). We have also moved discussions of teacher training into multiple chapters. We recognize that no book can treat all aspects of reading well, and so we have refrained from chapters on early literacy development of phonological awareness and word recognition, basic adult-literacy practices, reading disabilities, and primary-grade biliteracy instruction.

In writing this book, we have been encouraged by a number of people who did not let us slip behind on the project. We need to thank first Fredricka Stoller, who has read and commented on every page of this second edition. We also need to thank Jan Hulstijn, Norbert Schmitt, and Dongbo Zhang for reading and commenting on multiple chapters. The book has been made much better by their comments. We have also learned much from colleagues and

researchers from several academic fields, some of whom have greatly shaped our thinking over the years.

We hope that this book turns out to be as stimulating for readers as it has been for us to write. The book has changed our thinking on reading in a number of ways, and we hope that the book conveys some of the excitement that we have felt in rethinking concepts and in exploring 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, and by reading a lot.

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978-1-108-84010-1 — Reading in a Second Language  
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