

New Ideas for 2nd Language Learners

Summary: There is a great deal of sometimes divergent research occurring about how best to teach students who are learning a second language (most pressingly, English Language Learners). In an article for *Reading Research Quarterly*, Hossein Nassaji, professor of applied linguistics at the University of Victoria, reviews and summarizes key lessons from two new books on the topic.

Practical Applications

Nassaji reviews two new books: *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice* (Grabe, W.) and the compilation *Second Language Reading Research and Instruction: Crossing the Boundaries* (Han, Z. & Anderson, N.). While there are too many ideas to distill into one page, I will pull out the most actionable points that can be used in classroom instruction. In this research, the term “L2” is used to refer to any second-language learner.

From Grabe’s book, important points include:

- In addition to the critical importance of vocabulary, L2 students benefit from knowledge of text structure, meaning not only genre and purpose but also transition words, the elements of cohesion (how new information is linked), and the use of pronouns.
- Grammar instruction in general may have more importance than was known, especially for specific comprehension purposes such as following the timing of events, tracking referents (i.e. who or what words are referring to) and determining an author’s position.
- L2 students need to be taught to be strategic readers, “that is, readers who are able to select, use, and adjust reading strategies effectively and appropriately,” depending on the context. To achieve this, Grabe suggests reading strategies need to be taught explicitly, in tandem, and through the use of “regular modeling, scaffolding and long-term practice.”

From Han and Anderson’s book, one important point follows:

- While there is not universal agreement, many researchers suggest that L2 learners need to reach proficiency in two areas: reading comprehension, and language acquisition (having full fluency in all aspects of a language). Comprehension and acquisition are not always gained by the same activities, meaning that there should be opportunities for students to not only make meaning from the text but also to learn the form/structure of the text. Possible instructional approaches for serving both purposes are:
 - *Narrow Reading*. This means reading a range of texts on the same topic in order to provide chances to learn by “repeated exposure to the same linguistics forms”
 - *Processing Instruction*. This means helping students think about what they do when they see text. It is a three-step approach in which the teacher provides the same text to all students, teaches them about possible traps (e.g. thinking the first noun they come to in a sentence is the subject), and then leads practice activities.
 - *Textual Enhancement*. This means pulling students’ attention to linguistic forms through physical means such as bolding or underlining. Research suggests this helps a student notice the forms but he or she needs more to transfer that learning.

Citation

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<http://tinyurl.com/3m48wbe> (subscription only).