English Language and Literacy Learning: Research to Practice

How do adults learn to speak and read English as a second language?

What are the best ways to develop speaking and reading skills with ESL learners?

Over the past 20 years, a growing number of adult ESL educators and researchers have sought answers to these questions as they grapple with the challenges posed by an increasingly large and diverse population of adults in the United States learning English as a second language. This paper summarizes the literature on second language acquisition (focusing on learning to speak in a second language) and on adults learning to read in English and gives implications for instructional practice.

What Does the Research Say About Second Language Acquisition?

Studies of second language acquisition (SLA) focus primarily on the learning of oral language. They provide valuable information about how second languages are learned and the factors that influence the language learning process. Little research has been conducted on second language acquisition with English language learners in adult education contexts, and no controlled intervention studies have been done. The complexities of adult English as a second language (ESL) instruction make research in this field challenging. Investigating issues of culture, language, and education as well as tracking learner progress over time are not easy when working with diverse and mobile learner populations in varied learning contexts (e.g., workplace classes, general ESL classes, family literacy classes). However, the SLA literature gives important insights into the language acquisition process that can guide adult ESL instruction.

SLA researchers examine the development of communicative competence in a language—the ability to interpret the underlying meaning of a message, understand cultural references, use strategies to keep communication from breaking down, and apply the rules of grammar of the language (Savignon, 1997). They also study nonlinguistic influences on SLA such as age, anxiety, and motivation. (See Ellis, 1997; Gass & Selinker, 2001; & Pica, 2003 for extensive discussions of SLA theory and research.)

The following sections summarize the three major areas that are covered in the second language acquisition literature and that are critical to acquiring a second language: learner motivation, opportunities for interaction, and vocabulary knowledge. (This summary is adapted from Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003; see also NCLE's Web resource collection, *Second Language Acquisition*, for an annotated list of the studies that form the basis for this summary: www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/collections/SLA.html.)

Motivation

Dörnyei (2002a, p. 8) defines motivation as "why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, [and] how hard they are going to pursue it." Studies indicate that *integrative motivation* (wanting to learn a language in order to identify with the community that speaks it) promotes SLA regardless of the age of the learner or whether the language is being learned as a second or a foreign language (Gardner, 1985; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Learners may have *instrumental motivation*, the desire to learn the language to meet their needs and goals, such as getting a job or talking to their children's teachers (Morris, 2001; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Whether learners' motivation is integrative or instrumental, research indicates that teachers should learn about and respond to learners' needs and goals when planning instruction (Dörnyei & Csizer, 1998; Weddel & Van Duzer, 1997).

Teachers can help learners identify their motivations for learning English and their short-term goals and reflect on their progress and achievements. One way to do this is by using tools like those described below:

- Self-evaluation tools such as checklists to identify their skills, strengths, and weaknesses;

- Weekly checklists to track their progress towards meeting a learning goal; and

- Reflection tools such as learning diaries to help them build autonomy and take charge of their learning (Marshall, 2002).

(See *Needs Assessment and Learner Self-Evaluation*, page II–5, for examples of these tools and descriptions of ways they can be used.)

Recent research looks at how instructional contexts affect motivation. A learner's motivation may vary from day to day and even from task to task, and social factors (e.g., group dynamics, learning environment, and a learning partner's motivation) may affect a learner's attitude, effort, classroom behavior, and achievement (Dörnyei, 2002b). Therefore, teachers should create an environment that is conducive to learning by encouraging group cohesion in the classroom and by using varied and challenging instructional activities to help learners stay focused and engaged with instructional content (Dörnyei & Csizer, 1998). Activities that are done in pairs and small groups can provide learners with opportunities to share information and build a sense of community (Florez & Burt, 2001).

Research also suggests that teachers should create opportunities for learners to continue their language learning outside of class (Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994). Projects that are started in class and continued outside class are one way to do this. For example, a class might work together to create a book of information about community services for new families. In class they might brainstorm ideas and develop the outline for the book. Outside class, individual learners might collect information about different community agencies,

write it up, and bring it to class to be compiled in the book. Projects like this one give learners opportunities to work with others to accomplish tasks and to use English in real-life situations. (See Moss & Van Duzer, 1998, *Project-based Learning For Adult English Language Learners*, for discussion.)

New research on motivation and second language acquisition is examining specific factors that influence motivation and learning, such as personal goals, levels of self-confidence, and features of the learning environment (Dörnyei, 2003; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 2003).

Opportunities for Interaction

Interaction refers to communication between individuals, particularly when they are negotiating meaning or working to prevent a breakdown in communication (Ellis, 1999). Interaction provides learners with opportunities to receive language input (through hearing the language) and feedback (when the conversational partner responds, corrects, or asks for clarification). It also allows them to make changes to their language as the conversation proceeds (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1995). This allows learners to "notice the gap" between their use of the language and correct, native speaker use (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, p. 311).

Empirical research with second language learners indicates that participating in language interactions facilitates second language development. For example, a study of conversational interaction and learners' acquisition of question formation found that interaction increased their rate of acquisition (Mackey, 1999).

Research on interaction includes studies of task-based language learning and focus on form.

Task-based learning

- The goal of an interactive task is for learners to focus together on a topic or activity and exchange meaning about it (Ellis, 1999). Most tasks are done in pairs or small groups. SLA researchers have found that carefully designed tasks give learners opportunities to use the language (in this case English) in authentic situations and in meaningful ways. They have also found that learners tend to produce longer sentences and negotiate meaning more often in interactive tasks than they do in teacher-fronted instruction, where the teacher stands at the front of the room and leads the discussion (Doughty & Pica, 1986). When designing tasks, teachers should consider the learners' language proficiency, the goals of the lesson, the language to be practiced, the skills to be learned and content areas to be covered, opportunities to give feedback to learners, and classroom logistics.

- Interactive tasks seem to be most successful when they:
  - Center on a problem that is new or unfamiliar to the participants;
  - Require learners to exchange information;

o   Have a specific outcome;

o   Involve discussion of details; and

o   Involve the use of naturally occurring conversation and narratives (Ellis, 2000).

- In *problem-solving tasks*, learners have opportunities to share ideas, build consensus, and explain decisions about real-life issues that are important to them. For example, a group might have a hypothetical amount of money to spend and figure out a monthly budget for a family of four. (See Van Duzer & Burt, 1999, for discussion and examples of problem-solving tasks.)

- *Information gap tasks*, in which two people share information to complete the task, may be more structured than problem solving tasks and give learners opportunities to ask and answer questions. In *one-way information gap tasks*, one learner has all of the information (e.g., one learner describes a picture while the other draws it). In *two-way information gap tasks*, both learners have information that they must share with the other to complete the task (e.g., both have some information about directions to a location, but they have to share the information that they have to complete the directions). See McKay & Tom, 1999, for examples of one-way and two-way tasks.)

(See *Activities to Promote Interaction and Communication,* Information Gap Activities, page II–49 & 50, for examples of information gap activities.)

Focus on form

Instruction focused on grammatical forms and correct grammatical usage does not need to take place in isolation. Rather, learners' attention can be drawn to grammatical forms in the context of meaningful activities. The teacher's focus on the forms to be taught can be informed by the problems that learners are having with comprehension or production (Long, 2000). Research studies suggest that instruction that uses a focus-on-form approach and that incorporates form with meaning is as effective as more traditional approaches in which grammar is taught in isolation (Norris & Ortega, 2001). When lessons are based on authentic communication and there is a focus on form within that context, learners incorporate new and correct structures into their language use (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001).

When teaching about the forms of language, teachers need to consider learners' needs and goals and their readiness to understand the instruction. Teachers then need to decide how to draw learners' attention to a specific form and give them opportunities to practice it in meaningful activities (Doughty & Williams, 1998). For example, in a workplace class with intermediate- or advanced-level learners, the class might read and discuss a memo from an employer to an employee and focus on the use of the passive voice in the memo (e.g., "This report *must be finished* by 3:00 today).

Vocabulary Knowledge

Word knowledge is an essential component of communicative competence, and it is important for production and comprehension of a second language (Coady & Huckin, 1997). What does it mean to know a word? Vocabulary knowledge includes both the number of words one knows and the depth of knowledge about those words. Depth of knowledge refers to the pronunciation, spelling, and various meanings of the word; the contexts in which it can be used; the frequency with which it is used; its various parts of speech and forms; and how it combines (or collocates) with other words (e.g., vocabulary item "squander" is often combined with "time," "money," or "resources," as in "squander resources") (Folse, 2004; Qian, 1999).

Recent research has focused on *incidental vocabulary*, new words that are learned when one is focused on a meaningful task, such as hearing or reading a story, rather than specifically on learning new words. Learners figure out the meanings of words by paying attention to "clues" in the context; for example, learning that "picnic" means a meal outside when hearing about a family that has a picnic at the beach. (See Gass, 1999, for a summary of research on incidental vocabulary acquisition.) However, researchers argue that learners need to understand about 3,000 word families in order to pick up word meaning from context (Laufer, 1997). (For example, the family of "think" includes think, thinks, thought, thoughtful, thoughtfully.) Teachers then need to help learners build their vocabulary. One way to approach vocabulary instruction is to organize the words to be learned into thematically related units (e.g., vocabulary related to eating out with friends or taking a trip to the mall) (Folse, 2004).

Research also suggests that learners gain vocabulary knowledge through extensive reading, especially when reading is accompanied by vocabulary building activities (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Wesche & Paribakht, 2000). Teachers should include opportunities for reading to be done in class and assist learners in selecting texts that are of high interest to and at the appropriate level for them. Teachers should preview the important vocabulary in a reading passage before learners read it and teach words that are key to the meaning and that occur frequently. They also should show learners how to use dictionaries effectively.

Negotiation of meaning seems to have a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition (de la Fuente, 2002; Ellis & He, 1999; Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994). Teachers can provide learners with multiple opportunities to use new vocabulary in interactive situations in the following ways:

- Tasks requiring information sharing and information-gap activities (described on pages II–49 & 50);

- Games such as Bingo, Password, and Concentration;

- Projects and tasks that learners carry out outside of class, such as keeping vocabulary journals with new words they encounter and the strategies they use to learn them).

(See *Activities to Promote Interaction and Communication*, page II–41, for examples of these activities and games.)

Giving learners opportunities to interact with the teacher and with each other, planning instruction to include tasks that promote these opportunities, and teaching language forms and vocabulary in the context of meaningful learning activities are all ways in which second language acquisition research may be applied in the classroom.

What Does the Research Say About Learning to Read in English?

The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) found that more than half of the U. S. population studied had low literacy skills and that compared to native English speakers, a higher percentage of non-native English speakers read English at the lowest levels (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993; Greenburg, Macías, Rhodes, & Chan, 2001). Adults performing at the lowest levels had difficulty with basic literacy tasks in English, such as reading documents (e.g., time tables, forms, and maps), reading prose (e.g., newspaper articles, instructions on medicine bottles), and performing numeracy tasks (e.g., computing hours, calculating interest rates). These outcomes have caused concern that many adults, both native and non-native English speakers, lack the reading, writing, and functional skills necessary for living in a literate society. However, there is very little research on the reading development of adults who are non-native English speakers.

The National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) synthesized the limited research on adults learning English that was published between 1980 and 2002 (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). This synthesis focused on the reading development of adults in adult education and college-based intensive English programs (IEPs). The adults in these studies were ages 16 years and older and not enrolled in secondary schools. The research reviewed was published in refereed (peer-reviewed) journals, dissertations, the ERIC database, the Modern Language Association database, the Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts database, and books. Studies were included if they reported (1) outcomes related to reading (and, where applicable, general literacy) development, (2) descriptions of the adults participating, (3) details on the intervention or study situation, and (4) information on the procedures and outcome measures. The studies included used experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies based on comparisons between groups (with statistical tests for significance), non-experimental methods, and qualitative methods (descriptive and practitioner research). Theoretical discussions of reading development also were included. Descriptions of the articles reviewed, along with an annotated bibliography of the research (Adams & Burt, 2002, www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/bibliographies/readingbib.html) and a synthesis of the research (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003, www.cal.org/caela/research/raell.pdf), are available online.

In addition, Kruidenier (2002) has reviewed the research on reading instruction with native English speakers in adult basic education (ABE) programs. This and other resources are available online at www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading.

This discussion draws from the resources above to give a brief overview of the following questions and suggest implications for instruction:

- What factors influence the literacy development of adults learning English, and what challenges do they face when learning to read?

- What reading skills do adult English language learners need?

- What are the overall benefits of reading in a second language?

What Factors Influence the Literacy Development of Adults Learning English, and What Challenges Do They Face?

The factors discussed most frequently in the literature on learning to read in English as a second language are summarized here—learners' first-language literacy, educational background, second-language proficiency, and goals for learning English. Additional factors include learners' ages; motivations to read; instructional, living, and working environments; socio-cultural backgrounds; and learning abilities or disabilities.

First Language Literacy

Researchers have identified six different types of literacy learners according to their first-language literacy background: pre-literate, non-literate, semi-literate, non-alphabet literate, non-Roman alphabet literate, and Roman alphabet literate.

Pre-literate learners come from cultures where literacy is not common in everyday life. They might include those whose native language is not written or is being developed (e.g., the Bantu of Somalia and the Dinka of Sudan). They often have had little or no exposure to written text and may not be aware of the purposes of literacy in everyday life. They need to be taught how written language works. They generally progress slowly in literacy and other language instruction and may need frequent re-teaching of skills.

Non-literate learners come from cultures where literacy is more common, but they have not had sufficient access to literacy, often because of their socio-economic or political status. (For instance, adults from Central America may not know how to read or write in their native Spanish because of disrupted schooling due to war and poverty.) Although they have not learned to read, they have probably been exposed to written language and may have greater awareness of the value and uses of literacy than pre-literate learners. These adults may be reluctant to disclose their limited literacy background in class, and instruction with them may proceed slowly.

Semi-literate learners usually have had access to literacy in their native culture, but because of their socio-economic status or political or educational situation, they have not achieved a high level of literacy in their native language. These adults may have left school at a young age for economic or political reasons (e.g., as did many Southeast Asian refugees and Central American immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s), or they may have lived in the United States and developed oral English proficiency but not literacy.

Written materials used in teaching may be of limited use with pre-literate, non-literate, and semi-literate learners, and their retention of class material may be limited because they cannot use educational texts or take notes for later review. Because of their limited educational experiences, they may feel intimidated about learning English. At the same time, they are often highly motivated to learn. They need opportunities to increase their self-confidence in educational situations and to develop positive images of themselves as readers and writers (Goldberg, 1997; Strucker, 1997). They also may have learning disabilities that have not been diagnosed or addressed (Schwarz & Terrill, 2000). Programs should have procedures to identify and meet the needs of English language learners with learning disabilities. (See Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Schwarz & Terrill, 2000, and *Adult English Language Learners and Learning Disabilities*, page IV–59 for discussions of ways to identify and work with these learners.)

The following groups of learners are literate in their first language, have already developed reading skills, have formed reading behaviors, and know that written language can represent speech. Described below are characteristics and implications for teaching reading to individuals from these groups.

- Learners who are *literate in a language with a non-alphabetic script* (e.g., Chinese or Japanese) may focus on entire words rather than on letters or other word parts (as English readers do when using phonological decoding to identify words). This is because the symbols in non-alphabetic scripts often represent syllables or entire words. The written symbols in these languages do not represent sounds, as letters do in alphabetic languages. Therefore, like young readers, as described in the report of the National Reading Panel (2000), they must develop an "alphabetic strategy" (Birch, 2002, p. 33) to be able to read and write in an alphabetic script (Adams, 1990).

- Learners who are *literate in a language with a non-Roman alphabetic script* (e.g., Arabic, Greek, Korean, Russian, or Thai) know how to read with an alphabet, but they may struggle to find English words in the dictionary, and they need time to process written materials presented in class, because the writing system of their first language is different from that of English, both in the letters and, in some cases the directionality of the writing (e.g., Arabic, which is written from right to left).

- Learners who are *literate in a language with a Roman-alphabetic script (*e.g., French, German, or Spanish) know about sound/symbol correspondences. With

regard to vocabulary, they may find many linguistic similarities between their native languages and English. They can study ESL texts and take notes in class to learn new vocabulary or structures, and they can read outside of class. They still need to learn the sound-symbol correspondences of English before they are able to read well (Hilferty, 1996; Strucker & Davidson, 2003).

For a more detailed discussion of the role of the first-language in reading development see Burt & Peyton (2003) at www.cal.org/caela/digests/reading.htm. For more discussion of the types of first language backgrounds described here, see Birch (2002); Hilferty (1996); Huntley (1992); and Strucker & Davidson (2003).

In many adult ESL programs, decisions about learner placement and instructional approaches are based solely on learners' oral proficiency in English. However, learners' first-language literacy should be taken into consideration as well, because it can strongly influence the types of instruction they need and the rates of progress they are likely to make (Robson, 1982; Strucker & Davidson, 2003). First-language literacy is an important factor in the following decisions:

- *Assigning learners to classes.* Pre-literate, non-literate, and semi-literate learners may have difficulty using writing to reinforce what they learn orally and may learn less rapidly than other learners. They may benefit from being placed in both oral ESL *and* English literacy classes and in different classes from literate learners. This is not always easy to do, but it is sometimes possible in larger programs.

- *Designing and teaching ESL lessons.* Lessons that involve conveying a lot of information through writing (e.g., on the board or in written exercises) will be harder for pre-, non-, and semi-literate learners to understand. They may need much more conversational and visual support for content and skills covered than do literate learners.

- *Teaching literacy skills.* Non- and low-literate learners need to be taught basic literacy skills such as sound/symbol correspondence, the relationship between written symbols and oral speech, and the directionality of writing. Those who are literate in their first language need a different focus. According to some researchers, literate learners need to know 3,000 to 5,000 words in English before they can transfer their literacy skills from their first language to English (Laufer, 1997). This is a fairly high level of English; as a result, even literate learners probably need a heavy emphasis on vocabulary building. Furthermore, the transfer of reading skills from the native language to English will not be automatic. Learners need to be shown how to use the reading skills they have in their first language to help them read in English. They will also need direct instruction in English sound/symbol correspondences and other reading strategies.

Educational Background

Learners' language proficiency and literacy are often linked with their educational experiences in the following ways:

- *Learners with limited or no literacy in their first language* have probably had little or no experience with formal education. They may not be accustomed to sitting at desks for long periods of time, listening to a teacher, interacting with other adults as fellow learners, getting information from print, and studying outside of class. Their educational experience may have involved watching and learning from others. Therefore, their learning will be different from that of learners who have had more experience with formal education. Literacy instruction with these learners is more likely to be successful when they believe it is relevant to their lives and they feel comfortable in the instructional setting (Hardman, 1999; Klassen & Burnaby, 1993).

- *Learners who are highly literate in their first language* are more likely to have had formal education in that language, but their prior educational experiences may differ from those they have in the United States (Constantino, 1995; Tse, 1996a, 1996b). They may come to classes in the United States expecting a great deal of direct teaching and traditional approaches to learning, such as memorizing vocabulary lists and doing mechanical exercises. They may also tend to focus more on reading accuracy than on fluency. To improve their reading fluency and increase their exposure to English vocabulary, they may benefit from pleasure reading of texts appropriate to their reading proficiency level (texts in which they can read approximately 95 percent of the words) (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Coady, 1997; Laufer, 1997; Sökmen, 1997; Tse, 1996a, 1996b).

Second-Language Proficiency

Adult English language learners have varying levels of proficiency in English, which may influence their reading speed and comprehension (Tan, Moore, Dixon, & Nicholson, 1994). Studies suggest that learners need some level of proficiency in the second language to read effectively in the language (Alderson, 1984; Carrell, 1991; Tan, et al., 1994). It is as yet unclear how much of a grammar and discourse foundation is needed before one can read effectively. It seems, however, that the amount of foundation needed will vary, depending on the students themselves (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

Goals for Learning English

Adults learning English have different needs for literacy. Some of the most common are to be successful at work, participate in their children's education, achieve U.S. citizenship, participate in community activities in English, and pursue further education (Marshall, 2002).

Some learners may focus on improving their functional literacy for *advancement in the workplace* (Mikulecky, 1992). Many cannot advance in their jobs or receive the job training they need until they have achieved a functional level of English literacy. In many cases, a General Educational Development (GED) certificate may be required for job promotion (Mikulecky, 1992; Strucker, 1997).

Others may want to improve their literacy skills to *help their children in school* (Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995). The belief that parents' literacy influences children's eventual literacy attainment is one of the reasons behind the support for family literacy in the U.S. Department of Education (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2002). Since much of school-related communication is conducted in written English, limited English literacy may limit parents' involvement in their children's education and their communication with teachers, administrators, and counselors. Furthermore, adults who are not literate in English will have difficulty reading in English with their children and helping them learn English vocabulary.

A common literacy goal of adult ESL students focuses on *community participation*. Effective community participation includes having the skills to handle financial transactions and keep informed about developments in the community (Klassen & Burnaby, 1993; Strucker, 1997). In addition to integrating into the English-speaking community, adults who speak languages other than English and also are literate in English can be valuable resources for other community members. Opportunities for involvement in community activities are usually announced in writing and in English, and most advocacy activities that reach decision makers are conducted in English.

Adult ESL students also may wish to *gain U. S. citizenship*. To do this, they need to pass a written test on U.S. government and history, and at every step in the residency and citizenship process, they need to have the literacy skills to fill out immigration and citizenship forms.

Finally, many learners want to improve their literacy skills to *increase their opportunities to continue their education*. Some need to obtain a high school equivalency degree. Others are seeking English certification of degrees and skills they have in their native language or their home country. Still others need English reading skills to pass tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in order to enroll in institutions of higher education.

Curricula and materials used in instruction (commercial textbooks and teacher-produced materials) should match the goals of the learners. That is, school-related instruction and materials should be used with parents in family literacy programs, workplace instruction and materials should be used with workers, and civics-focused instruction and materials should be used in citizenship classes. It is a challenge, of course, to address learners' interests when a variety of goals for developing literacy are represented in one class or program.

What Reading Skills Do Adult English Language Learners Need?

Researchers working with native English speakers have focused on the following component skills of reading development: alphabetics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. (See Kruidenier, 2002, for discussion of these reading component skills with adult native English speakers.) Researchers working with adults learning English as a second language have focused on similar skills, but they are labeled and grouped somewhat differently— phonological processing, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic processing, and background knowledge. Figure IV–1 shows the terms used in reading research and instruction with native English speakers and gives implications for instruction with these two groups. Following the figure is a discussion of findings from research on English reading with adults learning English and their implications for instruction.

Figure IV–1: **Reading Terms and Their Application**

Alphabetics. "Alphabetics includes both phonemic awareness, or knowledge of the sounds of spoken language; and word analysis, or knowledge of the connection between written letters and sounds (letter-sound correspondence)" (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 35).

> *Phonological awareness* is the "broad term that includes phonemic awareness. In addition to identifying and manipulating larger parts of spoken language, such as words, syllables, and onsets and rimes, phonological awareness encompasses an awareness of other aspects of sound, such as rhyming, alliteration, and intonation" (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 3).
>
> *Phonemic awareness.* One type of phonological awareness, "phonemic awareness, is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds—phonemes—in spoken words" (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 4).
>
> *Phonics* "is the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes (the sounds of *spoken* language) and graphemes (the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in *written* language)" (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 4).
>
> *Word analysis* involves decoding words, sight word recognition, dictionary use, and structural analysis of words (e.g., knowledge of prefixes and suffixes) (Kruidenier, 2002).

- *Application to native English speakers*: Instruction in word analysis with native English speakers is usually done by having learners pronounce letters, word parts, or whole words. Nonsense words are often used to push learners to decode and not rely on sight words. The ability to read sight words is often assessed by having learners read lists of regularly and irregularly spelled words.

- *Application to non-native English speakers:* Alphabetics instruction often assumes high oral language skills and vocabulary knowledge, which adults learning English may not have. Using nonsense words is a questionable activity with these learners, who do not necessarily have proficiency in oral English.

Fluency is the ability to read easily and accurately with appropriate rhythm, intonation, and expression.

- *Application to native English speakers:* Instruction focuses on the accuracy and speed of oral or silent reading.

- *Application to non-native English speakers:* Oral reading accuracy and speed may be complicated by interference from the native language and may not indicate actual reading skill in the native language or in English.

Vocabulary refers to the words that a person understands and knows the meaning. Vocabulary knowledge is critical to the comprehension processes of a skilled reader.

- *Application to native English speakers:* Vocabulary building activities often build on themes such as family, the community, or the workplace. Learners are encouraged to determine the meanings of words from context. Learners often define words or choose the correct meanings of words among several choices.

- *Application to non-native English speakers*: Adults learning English may not have the background knowledge they need to work effectively with the themes usually used in U. S. classes. Teachers need to use themes that learners are familiar with or give them the background information they need. Learners need to have multiple exposures to specific words in different contexts and know how to use English and bilingual dictionaries (Folse, 2004). They need explicit instruction in defining words and doing multiple choice exercises

Reading comprehension is the ability to derive meaning from a written text. Skilled readers are purposeful and active in applying comprehension strategies to texts.

- *Application to native English speakers:* Native English speakers have oral English and culture-specific knowledge that guides their understanding of reading texts used in U. S. classes, and they can often describe orally the strategies they use to comprehend what they read.

- *Application to non-native English speakers:* English language skill and cultural knowledge may impede English language learners' comprehension and ability to talk about texts. Some researchers argue that readers need to understand more than 95 percent of the words in a passage before they can effectively determine meaning from context (e.g., Qian, 1999). Non-native English speakers may use comprehension strategies in their native language that they need to be taught to use when reading English, and they may not be able to talk about the strategies that they use. Teachers need to tie readings to learners' native languages and cultures whenever possible and teach specific strategies for comprehending a passage. Teachers should preview unfamiliar ideas, vocabulary, and formats (titles, pictures, graphics, and text structure) of texts before learners read them.

Research on Adults Learning to Read in English

The following discussion is organized around the categories that researchers studying English language learners typically focus on phonological processing, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic processing, and background knowledge.

Phonological Processing

Phonological processing (or decoding) involves interpreting written letters as sounds (*phonological awareness*) and combining letters into syllables and words (*word analysis*) (Adams, 1990; Kruidenier, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Some researchers argue that phonological processing skills are among the primary reading skill components that differentiate native and non-native English speakers learning to read (Koda, 1999). Researchers also argue that teaching adult ESL literacy students the letter-sound

correspondences in the English writing system through phonics instruction will improve their reading (Jones, 1996; Koda, 1999; Strucker & Davidson, 2003). Even advanced English learners whose native language is written with the Roman alphabet need instruction in decoding and in matching letters to sounds in English (Hilferty, 1996; Strucker & Davidson, 2003).

Some ways that teachers can develop students' phonological processing skills are to provide opportunities for them to do the following:

- Match letters to sounds (*phonics*).

- Listen to words related to a specific topic that begin with similar sounds (e.g., food – <u>ch</u>eese, <u>ch</u>icken, <u>ch</u>erries) (*phonemic awareness*).

- Attach morphemes to words (e.g., past tense markers on verbs, plural and possessive markers on nouns) and observe pronunciation changes (*word analysis*).

- Participate in oral readings and choral readings (*phonemic awareness*).

(See *Activities to Promote Reading Development*, page II–57, for descriptions of specific activities.)

Note: Beginning literacy learners may need structured, systematic instruction in decoding (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Kruidenier (2002) cites research on children that may apply to adult learners. This research shows that systematic phonics instruction is more effective with beginning readers than incidental instruction. Although the research cited was not done on English language learners, teachers working with groups of very low readers may find a structured program useful. "A program of systematic phonics instruction clearly identifies a carefully selected and useful set of letter-sound relationships and then organizes the introduction of these relationships into a logical instructional sequence" (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 16). Some examples of systematic language programs include *The Wilson Reading System, Lindamood-Bell,* and *Orton-Gillingham.*

Vocabulary knowledge

Vocabulary knowledge has been found to have a strong effect on reading comprehension (Brown, 1993; Sökmen, 1997; Coady, 1997; Coady, Mgoto, Hubbard, Graney, & Mokhtari, 1994; Folse, 2004; Zimmerman, 1997). Reading specialists argue that readers need to know 3,000- 5000 words in the language they are reading in order to read independently (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Laufer, 1997). Vocabulary knowledge includes both breadth (the number of words a reader knows or the number of content areas in which a reader is familiar with the vocabulary) and depth (the amount of knowledge a reader knows about individual words including their pronunciation, spelling, the parts of speech they may be used for, prefixes and suffixes that can be used with them and how those change word meaning and use, how the words are used in sentences, and various meanings of the words).

The following strategies to increase learners' vocabulary knowledge have been suggested in the literature:

- Teach vocabulary that learners will need to use often (high-frequency vocabulary).

- Teach key sight words that learners will need, such as *emergency, 911, last name, first name*, especially when learners are at beginning literacy levels. (Sight word knowledge is the ability to recognize words without having to sound them out.)

- Provide multiple opportunities for learners to read and use specific words in different texts and activities that are thematically related, such as the following:

  o Brainstorm vocabulary on a specific topic, such as food shopping.

  o Practice food vocabulary with flash cards.

  o Practice dialogues in which food vocabulary is used (e.g. "I am going shopping." "What do you need?" "I need bread, beans, and chicken.").

  o Complete cloze exercises (worksheets with sentences or paragraphs about food; key vocabulary words related to food are left out, with a blank for the learners to fill in).

  o Make a shopping list of items they need to buy.

  o For homework, copy food words from packages.

- Preview key vocabulary that will be used in a text or activity.

- Give the meanings of vocabulary words that may be difficult.

- Have learners write their own sentences with words they have read in a text.

- Teach learners how to use dictionaries.

- Use computer programs to provide more interactive vocabulary learning opportunities.

(See *Activities to Promote Reading Development*, page II–57, for descriptions of specific activities.)

Syntactic processing

Syntactic processing (related to reading comprehension in the literature on native English speakers) involves understanding the structures of the language and making connections among words in a sentence or among sentences and paragraphs in a text. For example, learners should be taught language forms that change the meanings of words, such as prefixes and suffixes. Learners should know common prefixes, such as non-, in-, im-, and un- that make words negative (as in *possible/impossible, happy/unhappy*), and suffixes, such

as the -ed verb ending used to form the past tense and the passive voice. They should also understand words that bring cohesion to a text (e.g., *however, therefore, nevertheless*).

Grammar instruction should be integrated with reading instruction, with learners' attention directed to syntactic structures in reading texts. Teachers can point out certain grammatical structures in a passage (e.g., all of the past tense verbs), choose reading passages that highlight the grammatical structures that students are learning, and have students find and mark specific grammatical structures.

Teachers also can help build learners' knowledge of grammar and syntax by having them do the following:

- Learners complete a cloze exercise, in which specific words left out of a text with blanks that they fill in. Some exercises might focus on nouns, others on verbs or adjectives, and so on. To provide support for students, these exercises may be done initially as a whole class, then in small groups, and then individually.

- Learners identify the parts of speech of certain words in a text (nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, etc.).

- Learners write their own sentences or longer texts, using specific grammatical forms (e.g., past tense verbs) and cohesion words (e.g., *however, therefore*).

(See *Activities to Promote Reading Development*, page II–57, for descriptions of specific activities.)

Background knowledge

Background knowledge is also related to reading comprehension in the literature on native English speakers. Readers generally understand texts more easily if they are familiar with and have information about the topics covered and the genres and text structures involved (Adams & Collins, 1985; Carrell, 1991; Goldberg, 1997; Hudson, 1982). If learners have low reading proficiency, readings about culturally familiar topics should be selected (Eskey, 1997). Even if readers are more advanced, the topics and structures of reading texts should be reviewed before learners begin reading, so that they are familiar (Goldberg, 1997).

To build on learners' background knowledge, teachers can do the following:

- Relate reading texts to ideas, concepts, and events from learners' cultures and personal experiences whenever possible.

- Use visual aids and physical objects to support understanding of unfamiliar ideas and themes.

- Preview unfamiliar ideas, actions, and settings.

- Preview titles, pictures, graphics, grammatical structures, and cohesion words used.

- Create language experience texts. In the language experience approach, learners have an experience together or share knowledge about an experience, such as taking a class trip, shopping for food, or coming to the United States. They discuss or answer questions about the experience and the teacher writes a text. They then copy the text and read it themselves. (See Holt, 1995, and *Activities to Promote Reading Development,* page II–57, for details about developing language experience stories.)

What Are the Benefits of Reading in a Second Language?

We have described above how second language proficiency facilitates reading development, but reading in English also can help develop language proficiency. The act of reading itself exposes us to language that we process as we seek to gain information that is important and meaningful. Therefore, at the same time that students learn from their reading about gardening, parenting in the United States, U.S. citizenship, or workplace benefits, they also are learning English.

Some of the benefits of reading for language development are the following:

- Reading texts provides one source of language input.

- Extensive or sustained reading can promote knowledge of the vocabulary and structures of English.

- Learners engaged in extensive reading tend to be more likely to enjoy reading and feel comfortable reading new texts.

- Extensive reading seems to develop writing ability in some learners, especially those with greater English proficiency and literacy skills.

(See Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, & Kuehn, 1990; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Constantino, 1995; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Tse, 1996a, 1996b for discussion of these benefits.)

In summary, reading can build second language vocabulary, conversational proficiency, and writing ability as well as reading proficiency. Teachers need to carefully select texts for learners or assist them in choosing their own texts at appropriate levels of reading difficulty. They need to focus on the level of decoding, vocabulary knowledge, and cultural or background knowledge needed to handle the texts. They also need to create classroom activities that will help learners understand and work with the texts and develop the key reading component skills.

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