Book reviews

Teaching reading to English language learners: A reflective guide

Farrell, T. S. C. (2008). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press (Sage Publications).

Reviewed by Bal Krishna Sharma

Teaching reading to English language learners: A reflective guide is a welcome addition in the existing body of literature in second/foreign language reading pedagogy. According to the preface, it is written for both pre-service and in-service teachers who teach reading to English-language learners, and 'it encourages each teacher to develop his or her own philosophy of teaching reading' (p vii). In addition, its back cover page stresses that this book 'focuses on helping students "read to learn" instead of [helping them] "learn to read". The book is organised into nine chapters in which Farrell talks about different aspects of teaching reading to English-language learners, and in which he also attempts to link teaching with the teacher's own experience as a reader and as a reading teacher.

In Chapter 1, Farrell provides a discussion on the nature and importance of second-language reading, and reiterates that the goal of second-language reading should be to move from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. At the same time, the chapter explains the difference between learning to read in the first language and learning to read in the subsequent language because the author believes that, as second-language readers come from different backgrounds, this has a bearing on learning to read in a second language. He talks particularly about three variables that contribute to differences in first- and second-language reading: linguistic differences, individual differences and sociocultural differences. The chapter then outlines some major principles of teaching reading to English-language learners that later form the focus for the individual chapters throughout the book. These chapters, the author believes, provide a useful tool for reading teachers to form their own philosophies of teaching second-language reading.

Chapter 2 addresses the first principle of teaching reading – reflecting on the reading process. Farrell believes that it is necessary for reading teachers to reflect on how the process of reading takes place. Building on the ideas mentioned in the first chapter, the nature and definition of second-language reading is further explained. Then the author moves on to discuss different models of reading. He highlights how the *top-down processing model, bottom-up processing model* and *interactive processing model* differ from each other in terms of their interpretation of how reading takes place. The author aligns himself with the *interactive processing model*, illustrated with an explanatory figure, since, he argues, 'it provides us with a more balanced view of the important contributions of both the text we are reading and our own creation of meaning from our background knowledge and experiences' (p 19). This chapter concludes with Farrell's justification for dealing with the definition, nature and models of reading. He explains that all the ideas discussed in this chapter help readers to develop their own understanding of the reading process.

Chapter 3 deals with two major goals of teaching reading: fluency and comprehension. Reviewing the literature in the field, the author first defines what reading fluency and reading comprehension mean in second-language reading and then goes on to discuss how they can be taught. Through a list of reflection questions, teachers as readers are asked to see how these two aspects of reading can be developed by designing effective reading activities. In this chapter, I was expecting to see some model activities that teachers could use to develop students' reading fluency and comprehension. To my disappointment, however, the chapter mentions only a few fluency and comprehension activities, without giving much detail and illustration to explain how they can be used in varied teaching contexts.

In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 the author develops two other major principles of teaching reading that were mentioned in the first chapter. The teaching of reading strategies gets substantial treatment in Chapter 4, starting with the difference between reading skills and reading strategies. Farrell argues that skills are 'more automatic and applied to the text unconsciously', while strategies are 'used purposely to achieve a particular reading goal' (p 33). Drawing on ideas from different authors, Farrell makes a possible list of reading strategies, and also provides a step-wise suggestion on how

reading strategies can be taught to language learners. I found myself particularly engaged in the section where the author mentions that 'the goal of teaching instruction is to develop strategic readers' (p 37) and provides a summary of what strategic readers do before reading, during reading and after reading.

Following the ideas on strategy training in Chapter 4, in Chapter 5 the author aims to highlight the importance of teaching text structure explicitly to learners so that they can notice how the main points and supporting details are organised coherently and cohesively in different types of texts. The first part of the chapter discusses different types of texts (for example, description, causation, problem–solution and compare–contrast) and presents them in the form of figures, and the second part deals with the techniques of developing awareness of text structure. Farrell makes it clear that in order to understand how information is organised, it is necessary to see the connection between ideas and words provided by *discourse markers* and to develop an awareness of how supporting details and examples elaborate the topics and main ideas.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 8 respectively deal with teaching vocabulary and promoting extensive reading. The section in Chapter 6 in which the author mentions the principles of teaching vocabulary caught my attention because it provides a useful list of criteria by which the teacher can make a sound judgment in selecting vocabulary items. Following this section is a set of activities and tips to help the reading teacher to teach word meaning and use through word analysis and word recognition. Teachers can also benefit from the section of this chapter in which the author provides a number of useful ideas for designing a vocabulary lesson, such as teaching the learners to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from the contexts. Similarly, Chapter 8 outlines and discusses how reading teachers can promote extensive reading habits to English-language learners so that they read more texts with better understanding and more pleasure. Based on Day and Bamford (1998), Farrell stresses that the reading material should be easy, varied and interesting and argues that the teacher can be a role model by reading while the students read along silently and individually.

In Chapter 7 and Chapter 9 respectively, Farrell discusses the planning of reading lessons and the assessment of authentic reading. The seventh chapter first discusses the principles of designing good lesson plans and provides a sample of a plan. The actual lesson plan, highlighting the purpose of each activity, functions as a good model for both novice and practising teachers and gives ideas on teaching steps, time management, task implementation and student engagement.

Because every reading activity has a purpose, it is necessary for both the teachers and the students to see whether and to what extent the purpose was achieved or whether the goals were met. In more formal social settings like schools or language programs, this usually takes the form of a test or some sort of assessment. Chapter 9 first justifies why assessment of reading is necessary, distinguishes between traditional and alternative forms of assessment, and explains how authentic assessment works. Farrell provides a set of principles that characterise authentic assessment and stresses that authentic performance-based assessment can provide specific feedback for students to reflect upon and support their language learning. He further provides a possible list of authentic assessment methods such as portfolios, peer assessment, self-reports, anecdotal records, attitude scales and informal reading inventories, and explains the rationale and pros and cons of each method. Teachers who are not familiar with new methods of assessment such as portfolios or peer assessment are cautioned that these methods, if not implemented properly, have more disadvantages than advantages. Peer assessment, for example, must be administered with details of guidelines and assessment purpose. However, although Farrell constantly cautions about the care to be taken while using authentic assessment, he fails to give details and examples of how teachers unfamiliar with these new methods can implement and benefit from them.

There are noticeable features of this text that characterise its strength and usefulness for language teachers. As mentioned earlier, one major goal of the book is to help teachers develop their philosophy of teaching reading for a second/ subsequent language. Two features of the texts are particularly concerned with this goal: a set of principles that explain the author's perspective on the given topic; and reflection questions that help readers to explore their own experiences of reading and teaching reading, and to consciously judge their own teaching practices. The chapters do not flow from a top-down approach of theory

to practice; rather, they draw on teachers' own experiences and help them legitimise their own teaching practices. The second goal is to provide insights for reading teachers to help their learners to move from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. I did not necessarily find a departure from the former to the latter in the book; rather, the writer balances a focus on both these aspects. The chapters on strategy training and awareness of text organisation, for example, aim to help learners to be strategic readers, as well as to develop skills and knowledge.

In addition to the author's presentation of two clear and major goals, the simplicity of language and clear division of topics and sub-topics in the text provide easy access to the ideas for both novice and experienced teachers. In line with the stated aims of the author, the book deliberately minimises the use of too many theoretical terms and references to the literature. As I read the text, I found each chapter sufficiently developed to stand on its own; therefore, it allows readers to choose the chapters they are interested in and to get practical tips for their classrooms.

In spite of its practical utility, I would have loved the text to be more comprehensive, as well as more detailed, in its treatment and coverage. Although the author repeatedly emphasises that the text can be used by teachers both in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, I see the text as more useful for ESL reading teachers. Its concepts, such as developing a philosophy of teaching reading, using portfolio and peer assessment, and so on, seem more applicable in ESL contexts. The author's lack of treatment to distinguish these varied situations of teaching reading could lead to confusion, especially for novice teachers. Similarly, the exclusion of some possible topics for discussion makes the text rather incomplete. For example, it could have included some chapters to deal with reading and writing relationships, the role of technology in teaching reading, types and roles of reading materials, and so on. Discussing the role of grammar in reading classes would be interesting and would address the controversial issue of grammar teaching, since in most EFL contexts the English language is taught in an integrated way and reading texts provide a basis for noticing, using and practising grammar rules.

Overall, Farrell's contribution fills a gap in the dearth of such practical materials in the language-teaching field, and in general its coverage overshadows its various weaknesses. Although novice teachers might benefit more from this volume than experienced ones, it is one of very few resources of its kind and serves as a practical guide for reading teachers.

Reference

Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Navigating in foreign language texts

Lundquist, L. (2008). Frederiksberg, Denmark: Samfunds Litteratur.

Reviewed by Jean Brick

Lundquist's *Navigating in foreign language texts* has been written to assist university students in reading foreign language texts. It approaches the problem of improving reading in a second language (L2) in the belief that learners can successfully transfer the principles used for processing first language (L1) to L2 reading and that if students are consciously instructed, this transfer will be all the more effective. While English is taken as the central language, the author also presents examples of her analytical approach in French, Spanish and German.

The text is divided into three sections that deal with top-down and bottom-up processing in reading and the role of cohesive features. This leads to the identification of a number of reading strategies that allow the reader to build a coherent and globally consistent mental model of a text. Finally, two e-learning programs aimed at developing the reading strategies identified by Lundquist are described.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Lundquist discusses top-down processing and first describes how readers build up a mental model of the text by using headings and opening sentences to activate prior knowledge and make predictions. Chapter 2 outlines the role of genre (very loosely defined), discourse and text type, collectively referred to as contextual clues, in determining an interpretation program for a text. This leads to the formulation of the first of Lundquist's major strategies: use prior knowledge, prediction and understanding of genre, discourse and text type to activate an expectation frame, which will determine the subsequent interpretation of the text.

Chapter 3 examines the contribution of bottom-up processing in foreign language reading. Lundquist starts by discussing the importance of chunking; that is, of breaking sentences down into units of meaning. She points out that readers automatically use their understanding of syntax in their native language to chunk, and goes on to claim that if readers develop an awareness of their use of chunking in L1 reading, they will be able to transfer this ability into their foreign language reading. Chunking demands the ability to recognise the structure of a sentence, and here

Lundquist points to the importance of the verb, or, rather, the importance of the verb frame, by which she means the verb and the number of *players* and *satellites* associated with it. Terms such as *player* and *satellite* are adopted rather than more conventional terms such as *direct* and *indirect object* and *prepositional phrase* in order to avoid alienating the reader with technical terminology. Recognition of the verb frame allows the reader to both predict the structure of the sentence and to identify the function of each of the players.

This discussion leads in to Chapter 4, which deals with vocabulary and the packaging of information into propositions. Lundquist describes several strategies for dealing with unfamiliar words, including guessing from context, using cognates, developing an understanding of word derivation, and the use of prefixes and suffixes. She then goes on to describe the ways in which information in a sentence is packaged in propositions. Readers are encouraged to recognise how propositions are related through subordination and embedding, and how they are situated through adverbials. Finally, they are expected to recognise lexical markers of subjectivity that alert them to how the *sender* expects the text to be interpreted.

Chapter 5 moves from the level of the sentence to the level of the text, identifying features that create a coherent text, including argument overlap (the use of co-referential expressions), anaphora, logical connectors and subordination. Using these features, readers trace paths of coherence through a text, and it is with this step that Lundquist brings together the various strategies she has discussed into an overall approach involving 13 sequential strategies, which, she argues, result in readers developing a clear and consistent mental model of the text.

Lundquist concludes by describing two freely available e-learning programs that seek to develop the reading strategies she has identified. TeXtRay focuses on developing the bottom-up strategies of sentence analysis, while NaviLire is concerned with identifying paths of coherence in specific text types.

Navigating in foreign language texts undoubtedly offers a useful approach to helping university students with high levels of competence in L2 English, French, Spanish or German to improve their foreign language reading. Its use by students of more diverse language backgrounds or lesser levels of L2 competence is more problematic. First, the assumption that L1 reading strategies

can easily be transferred to L2 is questionable. Substantial research suggests that this is true only after a certain threshold level in L2 is reached (Grabe and Stoller 2002; Pichette, Segalowitz and Connors 2003). Nor are all learners able to construct mental models with equal degrees of facility. Walter (2004) found that success in mental structure building in L2 is dependent on success in similar structure building in L1, and that L1 readers differ significantly in their ability to construct mental representations, even when their sentence to sentence understanding is similar.

While Lundquist suggests that strategies are transferred rather than knowledge, she perhaps takes insufficient account of the role of negative transfer, notably with regard to text structure and the order of information in sentences. She also does not deal with cases where readers in fact have little or no knowledge of the topic of the text (a common situation for students in the early months of tertiary study), beyond noting that such students will have difficulty in activating top-down strategies involving the use of prior knowledge.

In her discussion of vocabulary, Lundquist does not consider the claim of researchers such as Nation and Gu (2007) that the reader needs to understand 95 per cent of the words in a text in order to successfully guess the meaning of an unknown word. The emphasis that she places on using cognates is appropriate in the case of closely related languages such as French and Spanish (although the problem of *faux amis* cannot be ignored), but is likely to be much less useful in the case of more distantly related languages.

Having said this, *Navigating in foreign language texts* is likely to be a useful addition to a language teacher's library, not least because it presents a model of the reading process that reflects many of the complexities involved in developing efficient and effective second language readers, and because it outlines the model in a reader-friendly fashion.

References

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