

# Reading in First and Second Languages

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## **Introduction**

India is a linguistically diverse nation. This linguistic diversity can be attributed to colonization, migration, political influence, and the presence of different ethnic and religious minorities (Sridhar, 1996). Consequently, there is a presence of multiple languages in different parts of the nation, which adds complexity to the education system in India. The choice of language in the school curriculum is a major concern of language education. In this multilingual country, English has attained a distinct position. It is considered as a “library language” and “a window on the world” (NCF, 2005).

Reading is one of the key components of the language curriculum. According to Sinha (2012, p. 22), “The ability to comprehend is especially critical in schools because all the subjects require literacy to successfully develop knowledge”. Therefore, learning to read in two languages including English is a major challenge in India.

Bilingual classrooms are no longer an exception in India as almost every classroom is bilingual in some manner. However, defining bilingualism is not easy. Two extreme views are present on bilingualism. On the one hand, Edward (2000, p. 7) states that “Everyone is bilingual”. He explains that there is no one in the world who does not know at least a few words in a language other than the native language. On the other hand Bloomfield (1933) defines bilingualism as “native like control of two languages” (Hamers and Blanc, 2005, p. 56). In between the views

of Edward and Bloomfield, many definitions exist. According to Macnamara (1967), a bilingual person is one who possesses a minimal competence in only one of the four language skills, in a language other than his mother tongue (Hamers and Blanc, 2005). His definition is close to that of Edward. Li (2000), after listing more than thirty distinct types of bilingualism, interpreted the term bilingual as implying the use of two languages.

In India, both extremes of bilingualism are present. However, categorization of classrooms on the basis of bilingualism is not possible because extensive variations are present in terms of the two languages being used in classrooms. The reasons behind this can be many. One reason could be the presence of diverse types of schools—Private schools, English medium schools, Government schools, Government-aided schools, etc., all of which practice bilingualism. Of course, their degree of bilingualism may be different from one another. Irrespective of this diversity, every learner is supposed to function in two languages.

Not only is defining bilingualism complex, but the terms, L1 and L2, under consideration in this paper, also have various ranges. First language, native language and mother tongue are often used interchangeably. In this paper, L1 is considered as the first language acquired by the child, or the mother tongue, or the native language of the child. So far as L2 is concerned, that also has multiple definitions. Stern (1983) defines it as a language of official recognition

(cf. Mejia, 2002). Eliss (2003, p.3) explains L2 as "...language other than their mother tongue..." Therefore, in a multilingual country such as India, many second languages are possible. However, in this paper, I will focus on English as the second language.

As stated earlier, in this paper, I will examine reading in L1 and L2 with special attention to English. The paper is divided in two parts; in the first part I will focus on reading processes, and in the second part, I will discuss the differences between L1 and L2 reading.

### **What is Reading?**

Text is not completely explicit; the reader makes the text meaningful. Text, context and reader all interplay together to construe meaning; the role of the reader is very important in reading (Goodman, 1967; Anderson, 1984). Goodman (1967) views reading as a process in which the reader deals with information and constructs meaning continuously using various pieces of information including the text. While reading, the reader first makes predictions, and then conforms to or disagrees with them. Readers use their existing background knowledge information to help to make predictions, and retain what they learn in part by integrating their new learning with what they already know. Background knowledge has a very large range. It includes language, context, content, text and culture. In the following section, I will discuss the role of graphic, syntactic and semantic information in the process of reading.

### **Graphic, Syntactic and Semantic Information**

In Goodman's words:

Three kinds of information are available to the reader. One kind, the graphic information, reaches the reader visually. The other two, syntactic and semantic

information, are supplied by the reader as she begins to process the visual input. Since the reader's goal is meaning, he uses as much or as little of each of these kinds of information as is necessary to get to the meaning. (Cambourne, 1977).

For example, in the sentence, 'Ram is playing football', when the reader sees the word 'Ram', she / he can guess the next word 'is' without seeing it. The reader may be helped in this by the rules of auxiliary and the syntax of the language. Again, after reading 'is', the reader's syntactical knowledge gives a hint that a main verb is supposed to follow 'is', and not a preposition, noun, conjunction or any other word generally. More proficient readers may also expect a negative element 'not' or an adverb owing to their syntactic knowledge. The reader now sees the first letter of the next word—'p'. This 'p' eradicates many other possibilities, such as 'writing', 'eating', 'smoking', etc. Further, not all sounds can follow 'p' in a consonant cluster in the initial position; for example, English does not allow the combination such as 'pb' or 'pz'. These two important parts (semantic and syntactic) develop in different degrees in first and second language reading. In first language reading, the language system is completely developed, whereas in the second language it is still evolving. Also, in the second language the reader is more dependent on the text as she / he is not able to provide any of the language inputs independently which makes second language reading more challenging. The knowledge of syntax of language which is quite accurate in first language gives the reader a boost in his reading which is missing in second language reading. However, the main purpose of reading is to get the meaning and the reader uses as much or as little of each of these kinds of information as is necessary to get to the meaning. According to Goodman(1973), "He makes predictions of the grammatical structure; using the control over language structure he

learned when he learned oral language.” (Cambourne, 1977).

In the next section, I will explore the differences in the learning processes of L1 and L2.

### **Comparison: Reading in L1 and Reading in L2**

Reading itself has many challenges, whether it is in L1 or L2, although L2 is more challenging. Let us attempt to look at why L2 is more challenging. Although differences emerge naturally for various reasons, this paper will focus majorly on linguistic and processing differences, different amount of exposure (Grabe, 2012), and the differences between acquisition and learning (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 2003).

### **Linguistic and Processing Differences: Vocabulary, Grammar and Discourse Knowledge**

#### **Beginner Readers in L1**

According to Grabe (2012), the starting point of reading is immensely different for a learner in terms of his / her linguistic knowledge in L1 and L2. The learners begin reading in L1 after learning to communicate in the first language. This means, that by the age of six or seven, learners have a considerable amount of vocabulary (around 6000 words) when they are formally introduced to reading. In addition to this rich vocabulary, they also have a tacit knowledge of the grammatical structure of the language. So, they have already acquired a well-established language system. Now, children need to learn to make a connection between the language and its mapping system. This is itself a very complex process. However, they have considerable help in this from their well-developed oral language.

#### **Beginner Readers in L2**

In contrast with the learners of L1, beginners of L2 reading do not have the resource of several thousand words stored in their head to be matched with the newly sounded out word (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Thus, the benefit of developing letter-sound correspondence as a support of reading is lost in most L2 settings; second language students cannot match a sounded out word to a word that they know orally since they do not know the word orally (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Here for L2 learners, the task doubles—to know the word and then to identify the mapping of that word. Reading in L2 therefore also involves knowing / learning the new mapping system of L2, which the learner is still in the process of acquiring.

Grabe and Stoller (2002) explained that knowledge of discourse organization sets the way or strategies for acquiring reading skills. Readers not only predict the structure of language, they also predict the development of the text. Familiarity with text structure facilitates reading comprehension as text structure convention can vary from one language to another and awareness of those variations makes comprehension easy.

#### **Different Amount of Exposure**

A major difference in second language reading and one that strongly influences the linguistic knowledge differences mentioned above is the learners' exposure to second language reading and print. Most second language readers do not get enough exposure to second language print through reading to build fluency. Nor do they have enough exposure to build a large recognition vocabulary. These differences between first language and second language reading situations are significant because first language readers, over the years, get enough exposure to print to develop fluency automaticity (Grabe, 2012). Smith (1983), in his essay

“Twelve Easy Ways to Make Learning to Read Difficult” states, “Learning to read is a complex and delicate task in which almost all the rules, all the cues, and all the feedback can be obtained only through the act of reading itself. Children learn to read only by reading.” He further suggests that for facilitating their learning to read is to make reading easy for them. He gives the example of riding a bicycle; a child can only learn how to ride a bicycle by practicing it. Similarly, reading can also be learned only through the act of reading.

### Acquisition vs. Learning

Krashen (cf. Ellis, 2003) explains the difference between acquisition and learning. Acquisition implies a natural language development process. A target language is used in meaningful interactions with a native speaker, while learning is formal and conscious. In learning, the focus is on the form and function of the language rather than on meaning. Krashen claims that learning cannot be turned into acquisition. Only an acquired language can be used for natural and fluent communication. The first language is always acquired in a meaningful context and in a real situation. As we have discussed earlier, a fully-developed language system helps in developing reading comprehension, which is available in the first language but not in the second. It is therefore clear from this argument that reading in the first language is different from reading in a second language.

### Conclusion

Evidently reading in L2 has many more challenges than L1. A well-developed language system is not built only on the mechanism of language but also on the culture, context, usage and history of the people who speak it. Reading in L2 not only uses the first language literacy but also the culture, context, history, etc., of L1, because the reader is armed with all this

knowledge along with the language itself. Using all these resources to construct a new language system is what a reader has to do. Again, the new language system is not only the mechanism of the language, but like L1, it also has a culture, context, and a history of its own. The Indian culture shares a long history with English language. Utilizing the resources of both the languages enhances learning and understanding. Moreover, language is best acquired in a meaningful context; hence all teaching in a sense is language teaching. Teaching of English, therefore, can be strengthened by using the resources of L1.

To conclude, Indian classrooms are multilingual. Reading in L2 is different from reading in L1 in many ways. Linguistic and processing differences are just some of them. Apart from these important factors between L1 and L2, it is quite apparent that the L2 reading process involves the interplay of two language systems (Grabe, 2012). However, it is not only the language system that helps learners comprehend text. There are other factors that influence the reading process, such as the role of the reader, context, the purpose of reading, task, topic, goal, training, etc.. All these factors come into play when reading in L2.

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