1 Teaching Reading to ELLs

Reading can be one of the greatest pleasures we experience throughout our lives. Reading helps us in many ways: It entertains, educates, communicates, and informs us about the past, the present, and even the future. Many (but not all) children learn how to read in their first language before they enter the school system, and once in school, all depend on their teachers to help further develop their reading skills so that eventually they can discover the joy of reading. In many of our classrooms today, we find that many of our students do not use English as their first language and that many English language learners (ELLs—I use the term *English language learner* throughout this book to refer to students who are learning English as a second or subsequent language as well as those learning English as a foreign language) learning to read use similar, but not the same, processes as beginning readers learning to read in their first language. For example, many times, beginning ELLs plunge into a text when they start to read, but when they meet a difficult word or confusing sentence or paragraph, their reading grinds to a halt and becomes painful, boring, no fun, or too difficult for them to continue, and so some give up trying to learn how to read in the second/subsequent language.

Some of the problems associated with ELLs struggling to read can unfortunately be attributed to particular methods of reading instruction that either test rather than teach reading or that do not take into consideration the differences between learning to read in a first and a second/subsequent language. For instance, when a reading teacher asks his or her students to read a passage and answer the comprehension questions that

follow (or the *ten-question syndrome,* as my former colleagues at the National Institute of Education in Singapore called it), or to write a summary, or to explain the meaning of individual words and then to write the words in a sentence, all these are *testing* and not really teaching reading. Testing reading has a place in the curriculum but only after we teach our students *how* to read. We must also recognize that students learning to read in their first language have more knowledge of grammar and vocabulary than ELLs learning to read in a second/subsequent language. Furthermore, ELLs also have varying levels of English language proficiency that have an impact on reading comprehension.

The good news is that we *can teach* reading to our ELLs. Throughout this book I propose that the goal of teaching reading to ELLs is for our students to be able to turn "learning to read" into "reading to learn" (Carrell, 1998) so that they can become fully functioning members of our society. This chapter first discusses some of the differences between learning to read in a first language and learning to read in a subsequent language, because we cannot assume that second language readers from different language backgrounds (e.g., Chinese, Hmong, Spanish) will carry out the reading processes in the same ways when they learn to read in English. Then it outlines some principles of teaching reading to ELLs that lead to individual chapters, which form most of the contents of this book.

In addition, because this is a book about teaching reading, and because many of the activities in the book involve prereading and postreading activities, I also include such activities (under the heading Reflection) for readers to use when reading the contents of this book. I use one term for these activities: *reflection*, and this includes reflection-for-reading (or prereading reflection), reflecting-during-reading (or during-reading reflection), and reflection-on-reading (or postreading reflection). Thus I hope you can see that I am attempting to practice what I am preaching.

REFLECTION

- What do you think are the main differences between learning to read in a first language and a second/subsequent language?

LEARNING TO READ IN A FIRST AND A SECOND/SUBSEQUENT LANGUAGE

Most of the research that has been conducted on reading has focused on students learning to read in their first language, but an increasing amount

of recent reading research has related to students learning to read in their second and subsequent languages. However, many of these studies have been based on the original first language studies, and as Grabe and Stoller (2002, p. 40) have noted, "One of the most difficult talks we face as reading teachers is deciding how to make use of reading research for our own purposes [as teachers of ELLs]." That said, there is general agreement that ELLs begin reading in the second/subsequent language with a different knowledge base (e.g., more world knowledge, more developed cognitive abilities) than they had when they started to read in their first language (Grabe, 1991), and this has an impact on how we teachers should approach reading instruction.

The ways in which second language comprehension processes and instruction may differ from first language contexts can be classified as follows (adapted from Aebersold & Field, 1997, and Grabe & Stoller, 2002):

- Linguistic differences between the first and the second/subsequent language.
- Individual differences between first and second/subsequent language readers.
- Sociocultural differences between the first and second/subsequent language.

LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES

Research has suggested that there are differing amounts of lexical, grammatical, and discourse knowledge at the initial stages of first and second language reading. For example, Grabe and Stoller (2002) point out that by the age of six, most first language readers are "ready" to read because they have already learned (tacitly) grammatical structures of their first language, and they already have nearly 7,000 words stored in their heads. However, ELLs do not have this word bank to draw on when learning to read in the second/subsequent language. Thus, having them sound out a word to "discover" its meaning, a popular reading activity in many reading classes the world over, is not very effective, although it may still be effective for first language students.

In addition, because ELL readers do not have a tacit knowledge of the second language grammar, they need some additional instruction in building a foundation of structural knowledge and text organization for more effective reading comprehension (see Chapter 5, Teaching Text Structure to ELLs). Teachers of ELLs will probably need to teach vocabulary and discourse structure to their students from the very beginning of their reading

classes, because most ELL readers will not have been exposed to many English language texts (through reading that is). So they will not have been able to build up any real processing skills nor the large recognition vocabulary that readers learning in their first language have. In fact, first language readers already have spent years building up this amount of exposure to print needed to develop fluency and automaticity in reading.

Another aspect of linguistic differences between two languages that teachers of ELLs may want to consider, because it may influence second language reading comprehension, concerns the differences between the ELLs' first language and the second/subsequent language they are learning to read in, in this case English. Grabe and Stoller (2002, p. 47), for example, have pointed out that ELL students whose first language is a Romance language (e.g., Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese) tend to focus greater amounts of attention on "the ends of the words because there is more grammatical information there than in English," while readers whose first language is Chinese, Japanese, or Korean "will make greater use of visual processing" than readers of English, because of their "first language orthography." These linguistic differences can lead to variations in reading rates and reading fluency, and thus teachers of reading to ELLs may want to become more aware of their students' first language orthography and rhetorical structures. This can be accomplished by surveying the students about these on the very first day of instruction.

REFLECTION

- Why would it be important to become more aware of your ELLs' educational and linguistic backgrounds?
- I suggested above that you could survey your ELLs on the first day about their educational and linguistics backgrounds. How would you go about this? What questions would you ask them and why?
- What would be the implications for you as a teacher of reading to ELLs if you discovered that a student was illiterate in his or her first language? How would this impact your teaching of reading?
- What would be the implications for you as a teacher of reading to ELLs if you discovered that a student's first language writing system was very similar to English or very different from that of English?
- What would be the implications for you as a teacher of reading to ELLs if you discovered that a student could or could not describe and discuss rules of his or her own first language?
- Which students in the previous two questions do you think would improve faster as readers of English and why?

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Just as linguistic differences between the first and second/subsequent language influence the rate and success of learning to read, proficiency levels in the first language can also influence reading abilities and successes for ELLs. Research suggests that ELLs who are more literate in their first language are more able to transfer reading skills from their first language, although the exact way ELL readers can positively transfer this knowledge is still not clear. Koda (2005) suggests that ELLs who are less literate in their first language cannot really be expected to transfer many supporting resources to their second/subsequent language reading contexts.

In addition, individual ELLs tend to differ in terms of their *cognitive development* and *learning style*, especially when they start to study in the second language (Aebersold & Field, 1997). For example, the reading strategies of a six-year-old learning to read in a second/subsequent language are quite different from those of a 20-year-old learning to read in the second/subsequent language in terms of world knowledge and reading strategies acquired in the first language. So teachers of reading to ELLs may have to consider different approaches for children than for adults.

REFLECTION

- How would different levels of language proficiency impact your teaching of reading to ELLs?
- How would you approach teaching of reading to young ELLs and adult ELLs? Would it be the same or different?
- Rivera (1999) has suggested that ELLs may benefit from using their native language literacy skills, because they can transfer some basic skills in reading from their first to their second/subsequent language. Do you agree, and if so, what skills could they transfer? If you disagree, why do you think such skills are not transferable?

SOCIOCULTURAL DIFFERENCES

In some cultures literacy in the form of written texts may not be as common as it is in English. So teachers may want to consider what it means to be literate and how literacy is valued, used, and displayed in their ELL students' first languages. In addition, texts are not always organized in the same linear display in other languages as they are in English. For example, although this is controversial, Kaplan (1987) has pointed out that the

linear approach to English language includes a writer responsibility to make the text clear and direct to readers, and this is in direct contrast to the spiral structure and indirectness of many Asian languages, which have a tradition of reader responsibility to extract meaning from the text.

More specifically, there can be cultural differences in the ways texts express interpersonal relations with the reader in terms of presence or absence of personal pronouns and in terms of whether it is the writer's responsibility to provide details or the reader's responsibility to read between the lines. So, teachers may want to become more aware of their ELL students' attitudes toward different types of text, their purposes for reading, and the types of reading skills and strategies they use in their first language. Teachers may also be interested in understanding their students' use of different reading skills and strategies in the second/subsequent language, their beliefs about the reading process (e.g., the use of inference, memorization, nature of comprehension), their knowledge of text types in their first language (their formal schemata), and their background knowledge (their content schemata). This is because *all* of the above influence the level of success their ELLs will achieve while learning to read.

REFLECTION

- Read the following short paragraph (from Eskey, 2002, p. 6) and answer the 10 questions that follow.

  It was the day of the big party. Mary wondered if Johnny would like a kite. She ran to her bedroom, picked up her piggy bank, and shook it. There was no sound.

  1. Does this story take place in the past, present, or future?
  2. What did Mary wonder?
  3. What does the word *wonder* signal?
  4. What is a *kite?*
  5. What is a *piggy bank?*
  6. What kind of party do you think this is?
  7. Are Mary and Johnny adults or children?
  8. How is the kite related to the party?
  9. Why did Mary shake her piggy bank?
  10. Mary has a big problem; what is it?

- What do you notice about the reading skills and strategies you used to answer questions 1 to 5 and questions 6 to 10?

- Did you use the same or different skills and strategies to answer both sets of questions? Explain.

I usually answer questions like 1 to 5 by only decoding the text, because all the relevant information is included in the text. However, in order to answer questions 6 to 10, I must have certain knowledge of Western culture and particularly of birthday parties. This knowledge is not directly in the text, and some ELLs may not possess it. In order to make meaning from the text in the previous **Reflection** activity, ELLs must engage in what Eskey (2002, p. 6) has called "parallel processing," whereby the reader simultaneously decodes and engages in cultural interpretations of the text. This invisible process of reading produces enormous challenges for teachers of ELLs, because reading does not "generate any product that a teacher can see or hear or respond to" (Eskey, 2002, p. 6).

From the discussion above, I present the following principles of teaching reading; much of the following chapters are based on these principles.

PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING READING TO ELLs

The previous section outlined various differences (backed by research) between learning to read in a first language and in a second/subsequent language. Of course, we may wish that methods of teaching reading, either for first or subsequent language, had caught up with the results of these various research studies, but unfortunately this is not the case. In fact, there is still a general lack of agreement as to how reading should be taught to children in their first language. As Glasgow and Farrell (2007) have pointed out, in the United States the debates over the best teaching methods have even extended from educational into political and religious circles.

Thankfully though, the International Reading Association (IRA) has recently recognized that there is "no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read." It is best if teachers have a knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and are also aware of the learning styles and preferences of the children in their care, so they can "create the appropriate balance of methods needed for the children they teach" (International Reading Association, 2006). The IRA also suggests that "professionals who are closest to the children must be the ones to make the decisions about what reading methods to use," that is, that individual teachers should make this decision (IRA, 2006). In addition, August and Shanahan (2006) have recently noted that regardless of the type of program offered by a school (bilingual, dual immersion, sheltered instruction, or ESL), the keys to success are that the program is

based on a solid understanding of the research and that it is staffed by qualified educators.

This book suggests too that teachers of reading to ELLs not only utilize the research and methods outlined here but, more crucially, adapt them to their own students' needs and to the individual contexts they are teaching in. With this in mind, I now present eight principles of reading instruction for ELLs that can be adapted to each particular reading teacher's context. These principles are derived from both the research in learning to read in a first language (the dominant research that exists for second/subsequent language reading specialists and that forms the basis for much of the second/subsequent language reading research) and the existing research in learning to read in a second/subsequent language. Each principle forms a chapter in the proceeding pages of this book.

1. Reflect on reading.

A good starting principle for teachers of ELLs would be to reflect on their own reading behaviors, the nature of reading, and the reading process itself. Just because we are fluent readers does not mean that we can explain how we read, why we read what we read (the methods we employ), or that we actually understand the reading process. We need to examine the reading process in order to develop a philosophy of teaching reading, and we should also examine our own reading habits and behaviors to make sure they are not too far removed from what we ask our students to do.

After reflecting on our own reading behaviors and the reading process itself, we can now begin to reflect on how we currently teach reading in our classes. We can do this by asking another teacher to observe us as we teach or by using a video or audio recorder to become more aware of what we actually do. The main point of this first principle is that teachers of ELLs should look at themselves as readers and at their understanding of the reading process first, before they examine what is happening in their reading classes, so that they can make more informed decisions about how they want to teach reading to ELLs.

2. Teach fluency and comprehension.

Related to the first principle of reflecting on our practice of reading, we will now want to focus on the teaching of reading, both comprehension and fluency. Most first language learners read for general comprehension purposes that include getting some information from the text or just reading for pleasure. This type of reading for general comprehension requires an ability to understand information in a text and also an ability to interpret it appropriately. In order to achieve this comprehension, most first language

readers tend to read at rates between 200 and 300 words per minute, and so we can see how reading fluency is closely connected to reading comprehension. Fluent readers probably need to know about 95 percent or more of the words they see in texts, and ELLs may not know this percentage of the words they read. So teachers of ELLs may have to focus their instruction not only on reading strategies but also on how to make use of discourse information (text structure) to build both comprehension and fluency.

3. Teach reading strategies.

We can distinguish between skills of reading and strategies for reading. Skills of reading, according to Grabe and Stoller (2002, p. 15), include "linguistic processing abilities that are relatively automatic in their use and combinations," such as word recognition. Strategies are "a set of abilities that readers have conscious control over but are also relatively automatic such as skipping a word we may not know when reading" (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p. 15). Reading strategies indicate how readers make sense of what they read and what they do when they do not understand a passage. Research suggests that effective reading strategies can be taught to ELLs and that our students can benefit from such instruction. Strategy instruction also develops student knowledge about the reading process, introduces ELLs to specific strategies, and provides them with opportunities to discuss and practice strategies while reading. That said, the ultimate goal of reading instruction is not to teach individual reading strategies but rather to develop strategic readers.

4. Teach text structures.

Research in first language reading has suggested that students who can recognize and follow a text's basic discourse organization can also later recall more information from that text. In addition, students who have knowledge of discourse organization, so that they used the organization to later recall information from texts, are also better readers. Making ELLs aware of how texts are organized also helps them with their reading fluency, comprehension, and efficiency. Consequently, it seems plausible that we specifically teach ELLs how different texts are structured and organized and even how paragraphs are organized and cohesive.

5. Teach vocabulary building.

A large vocabulary is essential for ELLs, not only for reading purposes but also for all other related language skills such as speaking and writing. In fact, for ELLs, as Eskey and Grabe (1988, p. 232) have suggested, "Words

seem to have a status in language akin to that of molecules in physical structures, and good readers become remarkably adept at recognizing thousands of them at a glance." It seems logical then if we have ELL students read a lot, then they will be exposed to many new words and will learn and retain a lot of these new words. In fact, research in first language reading suggests readers will learn one to three new words out of every 20 new words that they are exposed to while reading through such incidental learning. However, for ELLs we need to also explicitly teach vocabulary by instructing students to guess word meanings from the context in order to understand unfamiliar vocabulary they may encounter while reading. They will also need to improve their vocabulary identification skills by doing rapid word-recognition exercises.

6. Promote extensive reading.

If I were to say the word *textbook* to you, what is the first thing that pops into your mind? Is it pain or is it pleasure? Do you have a happy feeling? Many would still sigh and say they already feel bored with that word, because most of the textbooks they used at school were boring. So, why do we continue to produce the same boring textbooks for our students to read? When we ask our students to take out their textbooks, they usually equate this with pain—they find these books very dull and uninteresting. Now, however, we reading teachers can provide some opportunities for our students to use alternative reading materials by promoting extensive reading of materials *they* are interested in.

7. Plan effective reading classes.

Teachers of ELLs also need to consider how to plan reading lessons that are effective so that they can help move their students from a position of *learning to read* to *reading to learn* as mentioned above. Planning for language lessons may be different from planning for other content lessons, because the same concepts may need to be reinforced time and again using different methods, especially for beginning and intermediate students. Richards (1990, pp. 89–90) suggests that an effective reading teacher should "develop (and convey these to his or her students) specific instructional objectives for his class that reflect the teaching of reading at all levels of proficiency." Some of these objectives include

- having students develop an awareness of reading strategies necessary for successful reading comprehension,
- having them expand vocabulary and techniques to increase their vocabulary bank,

- having them develop an awareness of linguistic and rhetorical structures found in different reading texts,
- increasing their reading speed and fluency, and
- providing practice in extensive reading skills.

8. Use authentic reading assessment.

When we think of a test, we see students sitting down with pencil or pen and writing on a piece of paper at a particular time in a particular place. They could be answering questions on a midterm exam, a final exam, a quiz, or an end-of-chapter test. Here, a teacher is trying to find out what the students have learned as a result of taking a specific course. These are called traditional paper-and-pencil tests, and more often than not they focus only on students' memorization abilities and not on what students can do with the information.

However, the word *assessment* is more encompassing in that it means more of an ongoing process that includes tests and also other kinds of measurement not possible with paper-and-pencil tests. In other words, to assess a student authentically does not always mean to test the student. Thus, assessment, as the word is used in this book, includes both the traditional, quantitative, paper-and-pencil tests and also such qualitative items as portfolio assessment, peer assessment, self-reports, anecdotal records, and attitude scales.

REFLECTION

- What do you think of each of the eight principles outlined above?
- Can you add more of your own principles for teaching reading to ELLs?

CONCLUSION

This chapter has noted several differences between learning to read in a first and a second/subsequent language. Although the research on teaching reading as a second/subsequent language has not yet caught up with the vast amount of research that has been conducted in learning to read in a first language, this chapter outlined eight principles of reading instruction that are based on a combination of the results of this research; each of these principles will be discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow.