



L2 multiple-documents comprehension: Exploring the contributions of L1 reading ability and strategic processing

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ABSTRACT

There is much prior L2 research estimating the contributions of strategic processing and L1 reading ability to L2 reading comprehension. This line of inquiry has, however, been mainly followed in relation to single-text reading. While multiple-documents comprehension constitutes the bulk of what EFL/ESL students do in their current academic environments, L2 research investigating the contributions of these two variables to this type of comprehension is essentially lacking. Against this background, the present paper reports on a study examining the relative contributions of strategic processing and L1 reading ability to L2 single-text vs. multiple-texts comprehension. To this end, 114 EFL students took measures of L1 reading ability, L2 single-text and multiple-texts reading comprehension, as well as self-reported strategic processing. Data were analyzed using regression analyses. The results indicated that while L1 reading ability and strategic processing contributed significantly to L2 single-text reading, only strategic processing was shown to contribute to L2 multiple-texts reading. Strategic processing was also shown to account for a much larger proportion of variance in L2 multiple-texts comprehension than L2 single-text comprehension.

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1. Introduction

There is general agreement among researchers and educators involved in L2 education that reading is a critical skill for L2 learners because they often depend on their literacy input much more than oral input (Eskey, 2005). There is also little dispute among researchers that reading is a highly complex process involving a multitude of variables, factors and components—both reader-based and language/text-based—that operate and interact simultaneously to help L2 learners in the process of constructing meanings from texts (Barry & Lazarte, 1998; Hammadou, 2000; McNeil, 2011; Nassaji, 2003; Phakiti, 2006; among others). Thus, both as a highly required skill and as a multi-faceted complex process, reading comprehension has been the focus of an extensive body of research in second language education which has yielded interesting results, has provided useful insights and has offered practical guidelines as to the more effective conceptualization and instruction of reading. One vibrant line of this body of research has been focused around identifying the contributions, to L2 reading, of variables thought to play significant roles in it. Variables including L1 reading ability, strategy awareness and use, prior knowledge, and L2 proficiency are among the ones which have been extensively studied as potential determinants of L2 reading ability.

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However, almost all this research has been conducted in the context of single-document comprehension which is defined as constructing meaning from a single text providing a source for answering a series of follow-up questions. Motivated primarily by the rapid access to a multiplicity of primary and secondary information sources provided by computerized information systems (Anmarkrud, Bråten, & Strømsø, 2014; Bråten & Strømsø, 2011), reading demands in the current academic contexts have far outgrown those required by single-document reading. The demands have moved towards “multiple-documents literacy [which] concerns the ability to locate, evaluate, and use diverse sources of information for the purpose of constructing and communicating an integrated, meaningful representation of a particular issue, subject, or situation” (Bråten & Strømsø, 2010a, p. 635). Present-day knowledge societies are, in point of fact, characterized by ready access to information sources, a web-like knowledge structure (Bråten & Strømsø, 2006a; Goldman, 2004) and accordingly the abundance of situations where students are routinely required to construct effective links across a variety of information sources and criss-cross a single scientific topic or issue from a variety of, sometimes contrasting, perspectives presented across diverse sources of information (Bråten & Strømsø, 2006a).

This, then, creates a new literacy context for students in general and EFL/ESL students, in particular. Within this new context, the ecological validity and the real-world relevancy of the findings from the single-text-dominated line of research are doubted and questioned (Strømsø & Bråten, 2002). The reason for this questioning lies in the fact “research in this area is [assumed to be] somewhat out of step with the intertextual reality encountering most readers in present-day society” (Bråten & Strømsø, 2011, p. 112) as this intertextual reality calls for a different set of conditions and requirements than those investigated within the single-text paradigm of reading research. High-quality learning in this emerging context, in point of fact, involves far more than simply constructing meaning from separate textual resources (Bråten & Strømsø, 2011).

It, thus, seems both interesting and necessary to investigate whether some of the findings within the single-text paradigm of reading research continue to hold in this new context of reading. Put it differently, it needs to be investigated whether developing the capital and competency to benefit from the emerging reading literacy required in the present-day academic contexts with its intertextual nature can be based on the body of findings from the single-text paradigm of reading research.

Two of the major variables investigated extensively within the context of single-text reading have been readers' L1 reading ability, conceptualized as understanding single texts, and their strategic processing. L1 reading ability was selected because it has been proposed as a variable in the compensatory model of L2 reading (Bernhardt, 2005) and strategic processing was also selected because it has been proposed as a component in the extended compensatory model of L2 reading (McNeil, 2012). Various studies have been conducted aiming at determining the relative contributions of these variables—in isolation or in conjunction with other variables—to L2 reading comprehension performance (Fecteau, 1999; van Gelderen, Schoonen, Stoel, Gloppe, & Hulstijn, 2007; Lee & Schallert, 1997; McNeil, 2011; Phakiti, 2003; Song, 2001; among others). However, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, no study has been conducted to explore the relative contributions of these two variables to L2 multiple-documents comprehension. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the relative contributions of L1 reading ability and strategic processing to L2 multiple-documents reading comprehension compared with L2 single-text comprehension.

2. Relevant literature

2.1. L1 reading ability and L2 reading comprehension

As noted above, L1 reading ability is one of the variables extensively studied in relation to L2 reading performance. Most research into this issue has been conducted in the context of Linguistic Interdependence (Cummins, 1979) or Linguistic Ceiling (Clarke, 1980) Hypotheses. According to the former hypothesis, L1 literacy is assumed to provide an effective foundation for L2 literacy. This position postulates basic resemblances between L1 and L2 language skills and strategies. It further posits that reading in L1 and L2 are interdependent (Jiang, 2011) and argues that reading ability in a second or foreign language has a significant shared variance with reading ability in a first language (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995). The latter hypothesis, however, assumes a role for L2 proficiency in L2 reading performance and development. Accordingly, it postulates that readers need to acquire a 'threshold' level of L2 proficiency before they are able to benefit from their L1 reading ability in their L2 reading performance (Jiang, 2011). These two hypotheses have, then, motivated a number of studies investigating the contributions of L1 reading ability to L2 reading performance, though mostly in conjunction with L2 proficiency.

Yamashita (2002), for example, examined the relative contributions of L1 reading ability and L2 language proficiency and the mutual compensatory effects of these two variables on L2 reading comprehension performance. Participants of the study were 241 Japanese university students who took tests of L2 proficiency, and L1 and L2 reading comprehension. Results of the regressions analysis revealed that both variables strongly predicted L2 reading comprehension. Language proficiency was, however, shown to be a stronger predictor of L2 reading comprehension than L1 reading ability. The results further showed a mutual compensation between the two variables so that a small increase in L2 proficiency compensated for a significant decline in L1 reading ability.

Pichette, Segalowitz, and Connors (2003) also investigated the relationship between L2 proficiency, L1 reading ability and L2 reading comprehension. The study was conducted with a total of 52 L1-Serbo-Croatian learners of L2 French who took two cloze tests of Serbo-Croatian and two cloze tests of French as measures of L1 and L2 reading ability, respectively, as well as a measure of French knowledge. Results of the regression analysis with L2 reading ability as the criterion variable and knowledge of L2 French and L1 reading ability as predictor variables revealed that together these two variables accounted for

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