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THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORD RECOGNITION IN READING IN LOWER PRIMARY POLISH LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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INTRODUCTION

Reading has been universally accepted as one of the sources of language input for bilingual learners (Chodkiewicz, 2000; 2016b), therefore implementing effective reading instruction early into the foreign language curriculum is indispensible. Yet, despite its advancement, research into reading instruction has yet to clarify all the issues concerning the development of early reading components in different language combinations. For instance, a gap can be found in the research into the processes of learning how to read in English by Polish learners. One of such processes that prove essential for fluent reading comprehension, yet are still underexplored in the EFL context, is visual word recognition. The research gap results in the lack of an adequate description of the didactic principles that would provide satisfactory guidance for practicing primary school EFL teachers in Poland.

The book has been inspired by the need to investigate the process of reading comprehension in native and additional languages, as well as the changes in word recognition as developed by primary Polish learners of English when exposed to a good quality balanced reading instruction. The recommendations for early reading instruction offered by the current English language methodology guidelines in Poland for grades 1-3 do not refer clearly to an approach which is constructed on a balanced combination of code- and meaning-based instruction. Even though such is the view favoured by many EFL specialists nowadays (Birch, 2002; Cameron, 2001; Wallace, 1999), the meaning-based approach to teaching reading seems to be the dominating one despite the fact that it may be insufficient for L2/FL learners to become proficient L2 users and independent readers. It seems necessary, therefore, to seek a more complete approach to teaching early reading in English, in particular more effective instruction in word recognition.

The process of recognizing words in reading has been of interest to numerous reading researchers since the end of the 19th century and was studied from two broad perspectives: as a source of information on the mental processes and as an essential aspect of reading (Adelman, 2012). Consequently, the end of the 20th century witnessed an increased commitment to the investigation of word recognition in early reading among bilingual learners (Schwartz & Van Hell, 2012). The research has frequently examined the similarities and differences in word recognition development among L2 and L1 learners as well as the influence of the cross-linguistic transfer of word recognition components in early L2 reading.

The study described in the second part of the book sets out to contribute to the research concerning early FL reading by focusing on the development of word recognition components among Polish lower-primary learners of English. Initially, the learners were exposed to two months pre-literacy course in English, where

the instruction focused on the oral language development, alphabetic knowledge, listening comprehension and vocabulary. Once the pre-literacy training was completed, the learners took part in an early EFL reading course, which lasted six months. During this time, the learners strengthened their word recognition components, that is alphabetics, sight word reading, phonemic decoding, oral language, reading comprehension and vocabulary, but also listening comprehension and spelling. During this 6-month-long investigation tests were conducted to assess changes in the components of word recognition, which comprised alphabetic knowledge, sight word reading, phonemic decoding and contextual word reading. Apart from this, both vocabulary and reading comprehension tests were conducted in order to find out to what extent the learners were able to cope with the language aspects covered within the four stages of the course when the measurements of the word recognition components were taken. More specifically, the study sought to investigate the following:

1. changes in the development of the learners' word recognition components comprising:
   - letter naming,
   - letter-sound matching,
   - sight word reading,
   - phonemic decoding,
   - contextual word reading;
2. changes in the learners' gains on reading comprehension tests;
3. changes in the learners' gains on vocabulary knowledge tests;
4. the extent to which the word recognition components will develop in the particular learners;
5. the potential positive correlations among the results of test in word recognition components for the whole group of the study participants and for the individual learners.

In the light of obligatory English instruction from the age of five in Poland, it is worth investigating the effect of the implementation of the balanced approach to teaching early reading in English, so as to work out some principled instruction guidelines for practicing teachers. Currently, lower primary Polish learners of English are not exposed to effective research-, and science-based instruction that would help them successfully develop all the aspects of early reading components including word recognition.

Reading is a complex term to explain and readers rarely become aware of the multitude of intricate and mutually dependent processes and components that reading comprehension involves. Chapter 1 of this book attempts to shed some light on the complex nature of reading and reading development. Initially, the varied views of reading characteristic of the different fields of study are discussed. Then, the cognitive processes involved in reading, both of lower- and higher-level,

are given attention to. The next part of Chapter 1 concentrates on the essential aspect of reading comprehension, that is on word recognition, by outlining its various models and specific features. After that, a model of reading comprehension called the Simple View of Reading is analysed and its limitations are pointed out. The final part of this chapter deals with reading motivation, the factor frequently overlooked by the theoretical models of reading, yet important from the point of view of a reading learner.

Chapter 2 attends specifically to the early reading development in alphabetic languages, focusing on the aspects and knowledge which underlie the ability to use the alphabet in reading. First, the role of language units in reading in alphabetic languages as well as differences in orthographic depth that affect learning to read are addressed. The main sources of difficulties early readers experience in reading are touched upon. The next part of Chapter 2 delineates the componential view of reading, in particular the role and importance of key component aspects of reading, such as the alphabetic knowledge, phonological and phonemic awareness, grapheme-phoneme correspondences, as well as vocabulary and comprehension. The final part of Chapter 2 concentrates on the discussion of commonly adopted approaches to teaching early reading in English as L1, including code-, and meaning-based approaches, and the balanced approach.

The focal point of Chapter 3 is the nature of becoming a bilingual reader. It aims to pinpoint the main differences between learning a second and a foreign language, and between the disproportions in early reading experience and language exposure of L1 and L2 learners. The sections that follow are dedicated to the connections between L1 and L2 reading, in particular to the linguistic transfer among the lower-level processes. Finally, the context of teaching reading in English to Polish primary school learners is presented, with the focus on the differences between Polish and English at the level of orthography that affect the process of learning to read in English. Furthermore, the current instructional guidelines offered to Polish teachers of English as to the way they should teach reading in that language are presented. The most noteworthy developments and major findings of the research in the field of early reading instruction in an L2 or FL context are also presented in Chapter 3. The research studies comparing the development of word recognition components in L1 and L2/FL are examined, in particular the significance of phonological abilities in word recognition. Special attention is drawn to the findings of the research into L1-L2/FL transfer of word recognition components. The last part of this chapter recounts the results of the empirical studies particularly relevant to the research undertaken by the author as part of her doctoral thesis.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the research study that formed part of the author's doctoral thesis. It offers a detailed analysis of the design of the study, outlines its purpose as well as describes the study setting and participants. It also gives an in-depth description of research instruments, the procedures and data collection methods.

In this part of the book also the study questions are posed in view of measuring the improvements in word recognition components of the six participants of the study involved in a six month early reading course in English as a foreign language.

Apart from this, Chapter 4 also displays the study results, discussion of the results and the learners' profiles as an additional source of qualitative information contributing to a more complete understanding of the process of learning to recognise words in English as a foreign language by Polish learners. The book closes with conclusions outlining potential implications of the current study results for early reading instruction in English as a foreign language. Some suggestions referring to the development of effective word recognition components in particular are put forward.

Key terms that need to be explained:

Early reading – the initial stage in reading development when readers learn to recognize printed words and read simple texts;

Mature reading – the final stage in reading development when reading is fluent;

Literacy – in a narrow meaning the term refers to the skills of reading and writing texts for various purposes, yet in a wider sense it refers to the ability to decipher and understand various formats and media through which information is passed (multiple literacies);

Decoding – the ability to use knowledge of graphic symbols and their corresponding sounds to recognize words that cannot be recognized on sight;

Orthography – the writing system characteristic of a particular language;

Grapheme-phoneme correspondence – the relationship between the graphical forms of letters and the corresponding phonemes.