

Introducing Reading for Young EFL Learners: Issues and Perspectives

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There have been conflicting perspectives regarding the issues of when and how to introduce reading in elementary school English. This paper presents a review of studies on the relationship between oral language and reading, as well as on the debate over different approaches to teaching beginning reading. Research indicates that it is advantageous for young EFL learners to develop oral language skills before they learn to read in English. The definitive level of oral proficiency essential for reading instruction is however difficult to pinpoint. In addition, there is evidence that just as oral proficiency supports literacy development, so does reading assist oral development in L2 learning. We need more finely grained analyses to identify specific oral language requirements for different stages of L2 reading development. With regards to the debate over phonics/whole language, research to date seems to endorse a balanced approach to teaching reading, but this requires a good understanding of both learners' developmental stages in reading and the effectiveness of each approach for learners at different stages. More emphasis should be given to how to appropriate each approach in an EFL context, as well as how to balance skills instruction with real reading for young EFL learners. Some implications for developing the next curriculum are then presented, and directions for future research are suggested as well.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since English was introduced as a required subject in elementary schools in 1997, many of the innovations have focused on oral language due to the emphasis on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) of the national curriculum. Less attention has been given to innovations in literacy practices. In recent years, however, there has been growing interest in the reconceptualization of CLT in English as a foreign language context (EFL); that is, successful communicative involvements consist of not only oral practice but also activities with text (Sullivan, 2000). Reading is indeed an important source through which EFL learners can be exposed to comprehensible, meaningful input (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Reading also enables learners to gain useful information and to communicate with English speakers over the world through the Internet. Reading instruction in the curriculum, nevertheless, still seems to be based on the traditional Audiolingual method rather than on meaningful exposure to print. Reading is thus delayed during the first grade of formal English instruction, grade 3, and the later introduction of written English is strictly controlled grade by grade: the alphabet for grade 4, words for grade 5, and sentences for grade 6 (Kyoyookbu, 1997). This has been questioned by proponents of a whole language approach, who have called for the integration of four language skills right from the start. The issues of when and how to introduce English reading have recently drawn more attention due to the revision of the current curriculum.

Due to the growing population of immigrant students, the issues of when and how to introduce literacy for young L2 learners have long been entertained by North American educators as well.¹ ESL researchers and reading experts have studied whether to delay English reading until after some level of proficiency has been reached in oral language as well as in native-language reading (Fitzgerald, 1995).

L2 learners begin the reading process with very different knowledge from L1 readers so that reading in a second language is influenced by factors that are normally not considered in L1 reading research (Grabe, 1991). The issue of when to introduce L2 reading basically concerns the relationship between oral language and reading, but learners' cognitive and linguistic growth in the L1 should be considered as well. This is because learners' L1 literacy background and cognitive development affect the way in which they proceed in the development of L2 reading. This unique process of L2 reading acquisition informs us of how to introduce reading in a second language. Second language educators then need to reflect carefully upon the current approaches to teaching beginning reading (e.g., phonics versus whole language).

In what follows, in order to explore the issues of when and how to introduce reading for young EFL learners, I will review studies that investigated the relationship between oral language and reading, as well as the debate over phonics/whole language. In doing so, I will discuss what is different about L2 reading and what needs to be considered by EFL educators. I will then conclude with directions for future research.

II. ORAL LANGUAGE AND READING

There have been two conflicting perspectives with regards to the introduction of L2

¹ Although 'literacy' refers to the ability to read and write, the term mainly refers to 'reading' for the purpose of this paper. It should be noted that there have been multiple perspectives on the way literacy can be defined as well.

reading. One sees oral language as a prerequisite to reading instruction so that the introduction of literacy is delayed until learners develop some degree of oral proficiency (e.g., Verhoeven, 1990). The other emphasizes the positive role of literacy in oral language development, and argues that learners may not need to wait until they are orally fluent to begin learning to read and write (e.g., Hudelson, 1984). Learning to read is definitely affected by understanding the language, and oral language, to some extent, precedes reading development in first language acquisition. However, there appears to be much more to consider in explaining the connection between oral language and reading in second language acquisition.

L1 reading research indicates that “learning to read is affected by the foundational skills of phonological processing, print awareness, and oral language” (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001, p. 12). Beginning L2 readers have both advantages and disadvantages in this regard. While “first language learners have already learned somewhere on the order of 5,000 to 7,000 words before they formally begin reading instruction in schools” (Grabe, 1991, p. 386), second language learners typically have not learned a large store of oral language vocabulary. L2 readers face other unique challenges as well, including sound/ symbol dissimilarity and a limited sense of L2 grammar (Lenters, 2004). It is certain that the acquisition of reading skills in the absence of a well-developed oral-aural competence is apt to be very different from the typical L1 reading context, in which knowledge of phonology, vocabulary, and syntax is generally much better developed. Beginning L2 readers, however, may have advantages if they are already literate in their L1. An L2 learner’s first language experience may influence his or her overall conceptualization of what reading is like and how the reading process works (Brown & Haynes, 1985). Although interference may occur according to the differences between two languages, L2 learners are also able to transfer some literacy skills from L1 to L2. The concepts of print, the alphabetic principle, rhyming, syntactic knowledge, and discourse skills are transferable from one language to another (Tabors & Snow, 2004). What complicates the matter, however, is that the extent to which the transfer of L1 literacy skills occurs depends on L1-L2 linguistic distance (Koda, 1996). Further, the functioning of transfer may vary as L2 proficiency increases. L2 reading researchers have proposed that skills and knowledge from L1 can be available for L2 readers, but only when the reader has a certain level of L2 oral proficiency (Alderson, 1984; Clarke, 1988; Lee & Schallert, 1997). That ‘a language threshold’ exists poses another important question to consider: How much L2 oral proficiency do second language readers need to have to make L1 reading knowledge work? Here, it should be noted that a language threshold cannot be determined in absolute terms. Rather, it is likely to depend on the type of reading task and learners’ individual differences (Carrell & Grabe, 2002; Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Koda (2005) also points out that “it seems essential for ensuring ‘linguistic threshold’ research to incorporate more finely

grained analyses to identify specific L2 linguistic requirements for individual reading competency components” (p. 24). In order to explain the relation between oral language and reading in L2 acquisition, therefore, it seems helpful to think about which component of oral language is more influential than others at the early stage of reading and how it relates to the specific aspect of reading.

Several researchers have proposed that different oral language skills make their most significant contributions to different points of reading development (Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002; Speece, Roth, Cooper, & de la Paz, 1999; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Oral language comprises a variety of skills such as phonological awareness, semantic and syntactic knowledge, conceptual knowledge, and narrative discourse skills (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Reading too requires the coordination and interaction of multiple skills, including automatic recognition skills, vocabulary and structural knowledge, discourse structure knowledge, background knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge (Bernhardt, 2000; Grabe, 1991). While it has not been specified how other aspects of oral language contribute to reading development at different points, research confirms that phonological awareness plays a critical role in the early stage of reading, the ‘code-cracking stage.’ This leads us to consider how phonological awareness relates to reading, as well as what this says about when to introduce L2 reading.

1. Oral Language as a Prerequisite to Reading Instruction

Phonological awareness refers to “the ability to detect and manipulate the sound structure of oral language” (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001, p. 15), and it is an oral language skill that can develop without any exposure to print or letters. A child’s phonological development has been recognized as playing a causal role in the acquisition of English literacy because English uses the alphabetic writing system, which maps speech to print at the level of the phoneme (Adams, 1990; Bradley & Bryant, 1983). Thus, children who can detect syllables, rhymes, or phonemes are better able to learn to read. If children cannot perceive the individual sounds in spoken words, they will have difficulty identifying the correspondence between print and the language it represents. Of particular interest is that the development of children’s abilities to recognize and categorize different phonological units relates to the development of their spoken vocabularies. This is because “growing vocabulary creates an implicit need for making comparisons between similar-sounding words” (Goswami, 2001, p. 111). It is then expected that due to their lack of exposure to oral language, L2 readers will have more difficulties in recognizing and categorizing phonological units as well as in learning to decode print.

Verhoeven (1990) investigated the differences in reading acquisition processes between L1 readers and L2 readers. He studied the Dutch children and Turkish children in the

Netherlands as they learned to read during the first two grades of primary school. It was found that “both word recognition and reading comprehension appear to be most strongly influenced by children’s oral proficiency in the second language” (p. 90). According to Verhoeven, children learn to recognize words in the following ways: phonemic mapping, recognition of orthographic patterns, and direct recognition of words already represented. He pointed out that young L2 learners have difficulty with all of these word recognition processes just because they lack the knowledge of the oral language most L1 readers bring to the process. Furthermore, as their working memory is strained by the struggle to recognize words, they cannot engage higher order comprehension processes. He then concluded that “young L2 readers should be helped to build up their oral skills, and that reading instruction should be matched to those skills” (p. 90). Droop and Verhoeven (2003) also found that oral language skills play a more important role in the explanation of the reading comprehension skills of L2 readers than of L1 readers. These findings suggest that it might be counterproductive to hurry young L2 learners into reading without ensuring adequate preparation. It should be noted, however, that the level of L2 oral proficiency essential for successful word recognition has not been specified in these studies. Further, there is evidence that just as development of phonological awareness leads to improved reading, so does reading increase phonological development.

2. The Positive Role of Literacy in Oral Language

Phonological awareness can be placed into the larger context of metalinguistic awareness (Yopp & Yopp, 2000), and it is well known that literacy increases metalinguistic awareness. What then is the influence of literacy on the development of phonological awareness? One of the influences of literacy is that it creates conceptual categories for thinking about language (Watson, 2001); “the effect of literacy is to render the elements of language opaque, to bring them into conscious awareness” (pp. 43-44). The alphabet thus facilitates the development of phonological awareness in that it provides a conceptual category by which children analyze their speech (Olson, 1996). There is mounting evidence that phonological awareness does not seem to be the automatic outcome of exposure to oral language and appears to depend on direct instruction in an alphabetic orthography. First of all, phonological awareness varies widely among English L1 children with normally developed oral language competence, and adult illiterates generally lack phonemic awareness (Goswami, 2001). Research also indicates that preschool children’s letter knowledge was a unique predictor of growth in phonological awareness (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001), and that the effects of phonological awareness training were stronger when letters were used (Hohn & Ehri, 1983; National Reading Panel, 2000). It is, therefore, possible that the early introduction of reading may speed the development of phonological

awareness so as to benefit L2 readers with limited exposure to oral language in learning to decode print. Specifically, providing beginning L2 readers with direct instruction in the alphabetic basics right from the start may help them develop sensitivity to sounds in the word pronunciations and encourage them to discover relations between sounds and letters they see in spellings of words. However, further empirical research needs to be done in this area, particularly in the context of English L2 reading.

Research on the cross-linguistic transfer of phonological awareness gives us another insight into the issue of when to introduce L2 reading. If it is possible to build on the strengths that a child already has in his or her first language, we can logically assume that L2 readers may develop their word recognition skills with relative ease, even in the absence of sufficient linguistic proficiency. Durgunoğlu, Nagy, and Hancin-Bhatt (1993) showed that Spanish-speaking beginning readers' performance on English word recognition tests was predicted by the levels of both Spanish phonological awareness and Spanish word recognition. They indicated that although children need to acquire new phonemes or new orthographic patterns in English, similar types of processing underlie both Spanish and English word recognition. In particular, as both languages are alphabetical, children may understand how orthographical symbols are mapped onto the phonological units, and this metalinguistic awareness is not language specific. It is, however, controversial whether the development of L2 word recognition skills is propelled primarily by common underlying cognitive processes or, alternatively, phonological and orthographic elements specific to the second-language (Geva & Siegel, 2000; Wade-Woolley & Geva, 2000). While English and Spanish have orthographic similarities, they differ in orthographic depth (i.e., degree of regularity in sound-symbol correspondence). Spanish speakers may not be able to engage knowledge and skills from L1 in recognizing English words especially when the script is complex. They have to develop additional strategies to cope with the opacity of English writing system. Moreover, recent studies on L1-L2 orthographic distance effects indicate that different writing systems do require qualitatively different processing procedures (Koda, 1996), and that L1-based facilitation occurs where L1 and L2 processing demands are identical (Birch, 2002; Koda, 2005). Nevertheless, little is known about "the relative extent to which transferred skills facilitate L2 reading acquisition across various L1 groups" (Koda, 2005, p. 47). Although Hangul is alphabetic like English, it is non-Roman alphabetic and also requires the assembly of individual symbols into syllable blocks. Further research needs to be done to unfold the precise ways in which Korean word recognition skills facilitate or interfere with English word recognition.

Although L2 readers face added challenges due to limited oral proficiency and cross-linguistic differences, second-language reading researchers have proved that reading instruction and oral language development can occur simultaneously through the

successful implementation of an extensive reading program using high-interest illustrated storybooks (Dlugosz, 2000; Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983) or a balanced approach to reading instruction (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 2000). Dlugosz (2000) shows how reading can assist oral language development in second language acquisition. In her pilot study of kindergarten children learning English in Poland, she compared the 'listening only group' with the 'target group' exposed to the written as well as oral forms of a story. The target group demonstrated not only much better retention rates for understanding and speaking but also increased eagerness to speak in English. It should be noted that the children were not yet reading in their mother tongue, Polish. Dlugosz argued that an early introduction to reading speeds L2 learners' progress in understanding and speaking the foreign language. She also maintained that by presenting them with both phonic and graphic forms of a word, we engage their two channels of perception and increase the number of associations children will have with a word, thus helping them retain the word in the long-term memory.

3. Summary and Implications

What does the discussion so far tell us about when to introduce reading for young L2 learners? Given the role of foundational oral skills in reading, it is advantageous for L2 readers to develop oral language skills before they learn to read in English. It might also be counterproductive to hurry young L2 learners into reading without ensuring adequate preparation. This, however, does not necessarily mean that some degree of L2 oral proficiency is a prerequisite to reading instruction. There is evidence that just as oral proficiency supports literacy development, so does reading assist oral development in a new language. In addition, the definitive level of oral proficiency essential for reading instruction is difficult to pinpoint. We need more finely grained analyses to identify specific oral language requirements for different stages of L2 reading development in this regard. Further, much still remains unknown about how L1 literacy background and L2 oral proficiency interacts through the development of L2 reading. More research needs to be done to uncover the developmental picture of how Korean learners proceed in English reading. We will then be able to make an evidence-based decision about whether reading should be delayed.

What then is the implication for English education in Korean elementary schools? It is clear that the discussion above does not specify the definitive level of oral proficiency for successful word recognition, and presents more questions than answers about when to introduce L2 reading. However, we need to consider that lack of phonological awareness seems to be part of a vicious cycle, which means the rich get richer and the poor get poorer (Pressley, 2002; Stanovich, 1986). Those with less language exposure know fewer words

and have less developed phonological awareness. This undermines learning to decode and, in turn, results in less exposure to reading. How then can educators support the reading development of L2 learners with limited oral proficiency? The dilemma between 'development' and 'learning' has a long tradition (Vygotsky, 1978): Is development always a prerequisite for learning or does learning triggers development? Despite the dearth of empirical research in this area, I would cautiously suggest that children need to acquire English letter knowledge right from the start, in grade 3. They need to know the letters of the alphabet and understand their linguistic significance (phonemic awareness), which may help children develop sensitivity to oral language by providing concrete markers. It also seems advantageous for them to be exposed to print as early as possible. Research on emergent literacy in L1 shows that a great deal of literacy development occurs even before formal reading instruction begins (Lancaster, 2001). Children are exposed to letters (e.g., plastic refrigerator letters) and printed words at an early age in homes where emergent literacy is supported. These children with rich print experiences will be more likely to succeed in formal reading instruction later than those with less print experiences. Although there is little empirical evidence for the early introduction of formal reading instruction, more attention, at least, should be paid to creating print-rich environment for young EFL learners. We should provide children with more opportunities to build familiarity with letters and words instead of keeping them from print. Finally, as the discussion to this point focuses on the level of the letters and words, one may ask the following questions: Does this endorse any particular instructional approach (skill-emphasis) or discredit any other (whole language)? Does this also mean that children learn the letters and words in isolation? In what ways can we foster children's phonological awareness? How should teachers go about teaching [beginning reading](#)? This leads us to the debate over phonics/whole language.

III. PHONICS VERSUS WHOLE LANGUAGE

Early literacy educators and theorists have been searching for the best way to teach reading. Jeanne Chall (1967) referred to the ongoing arguments involved in this search as the 'great debate'. The debate has centered on the relative effectiveness of the two approaches to the teaching of reading: a code-emphasis (e.g., phonics) and a meaning-emphasis approach (e.g., whole language) (Chall, 1997). Each approach holds its own view of what reading is and how it develops, which relates to when and how to introduce L2 reading.

For proponents of whole language, language is seen as indivisible, with the whole always being greater than the sum of the parts (Bainbridge & Malicky, 2000). At the core

of whole language is a focus on meaning as the essence of language learning. Whole language supporters firmly reject the idea that reading is made up of hierarchical sets of skills children need to develop in a predetermined order (Goodman, 1986; Weaver, 1994). They believe that learning to read is analogous to first-language acquisition and that it is a natural by-product of immersion in print experiences. They thus emphasize reading authentic text for meaning, right from the start, expecting that the alphabetic principle will be acquired incidentally from the reading for meaning. No wonder this view maintains that in second-language learning, both written and oral language can be developed simultaneously, and that the four language modes—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—are mutually supportive and cannot be separated (Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Rigg, 1991). Goodman (1986), a major proponent of whole language, argued as follows:

And in learning second languages, many people have more need and opportunity to read than to speak. In this case, reading will often be the first of the four language processes to develop. Simply put, people will learn whatever language forms and processes they need the most (p. 23).

In short, proponents of whole language maintain that second-language learners can learn to read as easily as learning to speak if it is whole, meaningful, and relevant to the learners rather than broken into bits and pieces. However, proponents of a code-emphasis approach argue that reading is neither natural nor as assured as learning to speak (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1997). Although they do not seem to have a specified view of when to introduce L2 reading, they assert that most explanations of reading acquisition ascribes specialized knowledge and specific training to the process of children learning to read. Although both sides agree that reading for meaning is the ultimate goal, they have radically differing views on how word recognition skills are learned, namely explicit versus implicit learning.

1. Explicit Versus Incidental Learning

A move back to phonics-based approaches in the mid-1990s in the United States was accelerated by the publication of Marilyn Jager Adams' book, *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*, in 1990. From her extensive review of research on reading, she concluded that systematic, explicit phonics instruction is the best way to teach reading. Proponents of phonics instruction underscore the vital role of automatic word recognition skills in reading acquisition. They cite as evidence the finding of eye-movement research that "skillful readers visually process virtually every letter of every word as they read, translating print to speech as they go" (Adams, 1994, p. 845). The automaticity of visual word recognition and phonological translation are thus essential in order for children to read the text with ease and speed. They acknowledge that the ability to recognize words is

a tiny component of the larger reading challenges, but argue that the more one must direct attention to local difficulties in reading, the less attention one has available to support a larger understanding. Explicit teaching of phonics skills, therefore, should not be left to self-discovery or chance (Ehri & McCormick, 2004; Stanovich & Stanovich, 1998).

Proponents of whole language acknowledge that letter familiarity and phonological recoding relate to reading development as well. However, they have called into question the explicit teaching of word recognition skills. They also have questioned the basic assumption that the knowledge adults show in isolated tasks must be explicitly taught to children. According to them, “such knowledge is the ‘result’ and not the ‘cause’ of becoming literate” (Adams et al., 1991, p. 376). They argue that word recognition skills can develop without explicit instruction and are consequences of reading experience and print exposure (Coles, 2000; Goodman, 1986).

In their response to the critiques by whole language supporters, proponents of phonics acknowledge that many young readers develop phonological awareness with little difficulty, but point out that there are many others who just do not seem to get it. They see explicit teaching of word recognition skills as a potential recourse for those students whose reading progress is so hard in coming (Adams, 1994; Ehri & McCormick, 2004). In addition, they emphasize that “phonemic awareness and letter familiarity serve powerfully to enable reading growth even as they are reciprocally strengthened and refined through it” (Adams et al., 1991, p. 389). They also make it clear that the productive knowledge of letter-sound correspondences comes not through drill but understanding, and that phonics skills should be incorporated with meaningful and motivated engagement with print.

2. Different Views of Learning and Teaching

Whole language aims to be a philosophy of education rather than just an approach to teaching reading. Goodman (1992) asks literacy educators: “Do readers construct knowledge or are they passive recipients of knowledge from texts?” (p. 191). This then empowers learners to be in control of what they read and write about. Whole language calls for the new roles for teachers as well and argues against the technology which does not permit them to use their knowledge in the classroom. Whole language also sees the classroom as a ‘democratic learning community’ where teachers and students learn together and learn to live peacefully together. They often blame proponents of phonics for confining the debate to a theoretical dispute over a reading model. Though mainly concerned with the reading process, phonics supporters do seem to address individual learners, especially those who have difficulty with reading in this regard. They alert whole language supporters to the possibility that if a child’s word-recognition skills are sufficiently poor, the time and effort involved in reading may overwhelm its rewards so that the child is likely to choose not to

read at all (Adams, 1994). They also encourage teachers to have “a more refined sense of their students, of how far they have progressed in their ability to read words, and of what types of instruction are most helpful for advancing their development as readers” (Ehri & McCormick, 2004, p. 386).

3. Toward a Balanced Approach to Teaching Reading

The discussion above tells us that the search for the best way to teaching reading has been inconclusive and we cannot take an intransigent attitude in the debate. In fact, Cummins (2003) points out that “confusion often has resulted from the distortion of opposing views that almost inevitably occurs when issues are hotly debated” (p. 6). In addition, part of the difficulty is that proponents of each side use different kinds of research to support their claims. Phonics supporters use exclusively positivistic studies with a control and experimental group to assess performance on standardized tests, whereas whole language supporters cite naturalistic research on how children learn to read and write, as well as classroom-based studies looking at long-term effects (Ediger, 2001).

Looking deeper into the debate, it becomes obvious that the direct teaching of phonics skills is not incompatible with a concurrent focus on encouraging reading for meaning. Both sides of the debate appear to agree that, ultimately, reading for meaning is paramount and the alphabetic code is important in learning to read and write (Strickland, 1998). Furthermore, it seems illusory to seek a one-size-fits-all solution to teaching reading. Most educators are now aware that no one teaching method will work for all learners; nor will one method work for any particular learner all the time. As such, research to date endorses a balanced approach to reading instruction that incorporates varying amounts of explicit phonics instruction together with an emphasis on reading authentic texts for meaning as students go through the process of reading acquisition. It is, however, not yet clear how much phonics instruction is needed and what type of instruction is effective at different points in reading development. Strickland noted that “the debates about phonics and phonemic awareness have less to do with their value than with the amount and type of instruction they require” (p. 8). Indeed, there is room for substantial variation in the way phonics is taught to children. Different approaches to phonics instruction vary according to the unit of analysis or how letter-sound combinations are represented to the student (National Reading Panel, 2000). Of particular interest here is that although phonics instruction has been associated with skill sheets and drills, new approaches to phonics based on constructivist principles have become increasingly available (see Pressley, 2002; Stahl, 2001). In constructive approaches to phonics instruction, children are encouraged to construct their own knowledge about words and to notice the patterns rather than to memorize complex phonics rules. In addition, children learn phonics skills, but not

necessarily through synthetic phonics instruction and highly decodable texts (Cuningham & Cuningham, 2003).² It seems necessary, then, for us to consider not only what type of phonics instruction is more appropriate for L2 learners at different stages of reading development but also how we can balance skills instruction with reading for meaning for specific groups of L2 learners.

4. How Does Each Approach Work for L2 Learners?

It is not a new idea that bottom-up processing and top-down processing interact as part of skilled reading and that they are in balance (Rumelhart, 1994). The problem is that it does not shed much light on what balanced reading instruction should be like for specific learners in a specific educational context. A truly balanced approach to teaching reading does require a good understanding of both learners' developmental stages in reading and the effectiveness of each approach for learners at different stages.

With regards to phonics instruction, some say that explicit and systematic phonics instruction benefits second language readers (Lenters, 2004; Stuart, 1999). Lenters (2004) argued that it appears to address L2 readers' perceived auditory weakness as well as limited orthographic knowledge. Stuart (1999) also found that the Jolly Phonics Program could be effectively used with second language children. Central to the program was the use of meaningful stories to reinforce recognition and recall of letter-sound relationships. However, L2 readers' oral vocabulary constraints need to be taken into serious consideration in applying phonics. Specifically, we should be careful about its underlying assumption that learners already know the sounds of the language (Ediger, 2001). For L1 learners in English, the primary task in learning to read is linking visual word labels to oral vocabulary. Thus, learning to decode print is pivotal in early language development and phonics instruction may be developmentally appropriate right from the beginning of formal reading instruction. In contrast, second-language learners are often unlikely to have the target words in their oral language repertoire. In this case, learners may have to learn not only the sounds and shapes of the word but also its meaning, as well as the spelling pattern, which might be too complex and burdensome for young children. Different ways of reading words should be considered in this regard. Ehri (1998) suggests that children go through a series of phases in word learning. Initially, children are in a pre-alphabetic stage in which they rely on visual cues to read words. As they develop phonological awareness, they begin to use phonetic cues, first the initial sound and later other salient sounds in words, which is called the partial alphabetic phase. They are in a fully alphabetic phase if

² "Synthetic phonics approaches begin by teaching children individual sounds for letters and then having them blend those letters together to sound out words" (Cuningham & Cuningham, 2003, p. 93).

they possess working knowledge of the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences, including vowels, but decoding is slow and laborious at this phase. This stage progresses to the consolidated- alphabetic phase, in which children can use chunks of letters to recognize words quickly and automatically. It is argued that certain instructional methods are not considered to be effective if a child has not reached a certain stage of word recognition. For example, word reading by analogy, a type of phonics instruction, needs to be taught after a child has reached the phonetic cue level (Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl, 1998). Given the different phases of word learning, it may not be appropriate to give young L2 readers phonics instruction right from the start because they may still be in the pre-alphabetic stage of reading. Rather, the 'look and say' method can help them to associate the graphic form of a word with a sound more easily, as well as to learn the meaning of that word (Dlugosz, 2000). In addition, at this stage, phonemic awareness instruction with letters seems more developmentally appropriate rather than phonics instruction. For instance, children can be asked to listen for initial and final sounds in the words and select letters for those sounds through game-like listening and sound manipulation activities (see Yopp & Yopp, 2000). This can be extended to include phonics instruction when children reach the pre-alphabetic stage. Ehri and McCormick (2004) also suggest that phonemic awareness instruction prepares learners to process print alphabetically and helps them to move from the pre-alphabetic to the partial-alphabetic phase of development. They suggest other instructional implications for each stage of development to help learners to move into the next phase as well. Although their work focuses on L1 reading, instructional suggestions for each stage of [word learning](#) seem of special value even for young second language learners. It seems essential for L2 educators to carefully consider in what stage of word learning children are and what instructional support is more developmentally appropriate for each stage of development.

With regards to whole language, its philosophy of education seems invaluable in terms of motivating second language children to learn to read. Research on whole language classrooms shows that students' motivation for reading has to do with empowerment (Oldfather, 1993). In the whole language classroom, learners are encouraged to choose personally interesting and relevant books. They become motivated to read by taking personal ownership of their reading. Because of instructional constraints in EFL classrooms (e.g., limited time, lack of resources), it may be difficult to encourage L2 learners to choose personally interesting storybooks and do independent reading. However, it seems certain that learners become motivated to read when reading instruction is interesting, meaningful, and relevant to them. Indeed, one of the main concerns in teaching young EFL learners has been how to motivate them to learn the new language. Educators should be reminded that some L2 classrooms often tend to emphasize discrete skills as well as low-level activities, with much attention to learners' limited proficiency of the target language (Hall, 1999).

Young L2 learners do need motivating experiences that enable them to initiate and sustain learning to read. Hamayan (1994) argues that “a focus on the form and structures of language without a functional context makes learning abstract and therefore meaningless and difficult” (p. 288). Focusing solely on a skills emphasis approach to reading is devoid of motivating experiences for young learners, which reduces reading to a boring chore. The functional view of literacy in whole language also seems to be consistent with communicative approaches to second-language acquisition in that it underscores the authenticity of text and the meaningful, functional use of reading. However, as mentioned earlier, whereas oral language typically is acquired from immersion in a speaking community, reading simply does not develop in that way. It may be too optimistic to think that L2 reading develops easily by immersing students in real reading. Its use of real, authentic storybooks seems difficult to adopt for young second language learners as well. The top-down processing view of reading in this approach suggests that beginning readers use semantic context cues (e.g., pictures) in reading, despite limited proficiency. Although this view has great potential in encouraging young learners to be more active in meaning construction, research shows that inferring word meanings from context is a slow and uncertain process for beginning readers (Schwanenflugel, Stahl, & McFalls, 1997). In addition, research on vocabulary size found that readers must be familiar with a minimum of 95% of the vocabulary in the text for comprehension to occur (Carrell & Grabe, 2002). Considering that L2 learners’ limited oral proficiency and cross-linguistic differences add unique challenges to L2 reading, the whole application of it for young L2 readers is not unproblematic. It then becomes of critical importance to think about how to make reading instruction both comprehensible and interesting in L2 classrooms. First of all, students should be introduced to appropriate storybooks corresponding to their interest and L2 proficiency, and this requires teachers to have a sophisticated repertoire of available storybooks for specific groups of learners. Secondly, it is possible that learners initially listen to meaningful text, and only part of the text (e.g., key words or sentences) can be introduced as written forms.

5. Summary and Implications

The debate over phonics/whole language tells us that we cannot take an intransigent attitude in the debate and that the direct teaching of phonics skills is not incompatible with a concurrent focus on encouraging reading for meaning. Not only L1 readers but also L2 readers need both explicit teaching of word recognition skills and extensive exposure to meaningful text. We must nevertheless carefully consider how each approach works for second language children. First of all, young L2 learners need systematic teaching of phonics to develop word recognition skills, but it may need to be based on both learners’

oral language repertoire and their developmental stage of word learning in order to be learnable. Meanwhile, L2 children will be able to learn new words more easily by the ‘look and say’ method and develop a large store of sight vocabulary. In addition, phonemic awareness instruction with letters seems developmentally more appropriate than phonics at the early stage of word learning, and it can be implemented through game-like listening and sound manipulation activities. Second, EFL educators should be reminded that sequencing all the language, vocabulary, and skills so carefully may result in boring and artificial readings. The strict control of written English in the current curriculum, therefore, should be taken into serious reconsideration by English educators and policy makers. Meaningful exposure to print does require that four language skills should be integrated right from the start. Learners will then be able to experience reading in rich contexts rather than in isolated drill-like activities. This does not necessarily mean that we should teach authentic text right from the start. Rather, this means that reading instruction should be incorporated into listening and speaking activities so as to introduce words and letters in meaningful contexts. It should also be considered that reading can assist oral language development. Exposure to meaningful text such as a storybook will be likely not only to make L2 classroom motivating and cognitively challenging but also to enrich communicative activities. As Hall (1999) pointed out, communicative activities in beginning L2 classrooms often tend to focus on drill-like question and answer activities such as “How’s the weather today?” or “How old is he?”. Teachers may read aloud high-interest storybooks and build meaningful, communicative activities around them. In conclusion, instead of the whole application of each approach, more emphasis should be given to how to appropriate each approach in an EFL context, as well as how to balance skills instruction with real reading for young EFL learners.

IV. **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The purpose of this paper is to inform curriculum developers and educators of what is involved in deciding when and how to introduce reading for young EFL learners in Korea. I it is my hope that this paper can provide some preliminary insights into those issues and that more thoughtful and informed decisions can be made by curriculum developers. Through the literature review, it became apparent that little is known about the developmental pathways of beginning L2 reading. There could be several reasons for this. First, although teaching foreign languages in elementary school has continued to grow more popular throughout the world, it remains a fairly recent phenomenon. Second, a top-down view of reading has dominated L2 reading research to date so that there has been a dearth of research on beginning L2 reading (see Birch, 2002). Third, as mentioned earlier

in this paper, many of the innovations have focused on oral language due to communicative approaches to second language acquisition. In order to make more informed decisions about when and how to introduce reading, we need a more comprehensive understanding of how Korean learners proceed in the development of English reading in relation to L2 oral proficiency, L2 print experiences, and L1 literacy background. More theoretical research needs to be done to uncover the processes of beginning L2 reading development.

More attention needs to be given to teacher education and classroom research in the research community as well. We should be reminded that the national curriculum itself is a document that is subject to numerous interpretations by teachers, and that education is accomplished through teachers and students, not regulations. The debate over phonics/whole language tells us that there is no best method for teaching reading, and that instruction should be balanced so as to be sensitive to the strengths and interests of its students. However, a balanced approach to teaching reading requires a complex articulation of skills instruction and whole language, which in turn requires an in-depth understanding of each approach as well as detailed monitoring of students as they read. There is no doubt that if teachers are to develop phonemic awareness and teach phonics to students, they must first understand phonemic awareness and phonics well. They must also know about available storybooks to read aloud and how to engage children in real reading and writing activities. Policy makers should be mindful of how teachers felt when English was first introduced in elementary schools. Teachers need to be prepared to teach English reading in a variety of ways, and teacher-training programs should address their concerns. This does not mean that teachers are passive recipients of the training program. Rather, they should be given an opportunity to know and think more about different approaches to teaching reading. Finally, there has been little research on what is going on in English reading classrooms. How can we comment on effective reading instruction without knowing much about actual classrooms? More ethnographic studies of English classrooms thus need to be undertaken to do justice to the experiences of teachers and learners. The following areas call for more attention: learners' motivating and demotivating experiences of reading instruction; teachers' beliefs about reading instruction and their teaching practice; and teachers' perceived difficulties in implementing reading instruction.

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