The Role of Phonological Awareness in Korean Elementary EFL Learners’ Word Reading

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This study examined the relationship between phonological awareness in the two languages of Korean elementary EFL learners and its predictive role in word decoding skills in English. 113 4th grade students enrolled in a Korean public elementary school were tested on a range of phonological awareness and emergent literacy skills measures, including word and pseudoword reading and English vocabulary knowledge. The findings indicate that their English phonological awareness was a significant predictor for their word reading skills, when controlling for the effects of outside-school English-learning factors, and that their Korean phonological awareness significantly explained their English reading abilities over and above their English phonological awareness. The results are discussed in terms of implications for phonological awareness training and phonics instruction.

I. INTRODUCTION

Through constant research effort in the last two decades, it is well established by now that both monolingual and bilingual children’s early decoding skill is an important precursor to their later reading success and that their phonological awareness (PA) is a crucial factor that explains early decoding skills and later reading abilities (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1999). Research with bilingual children and second language (L2) learners has demonstrated that in general, PA in one language is not only related to PA in the other language, but is also associated with reading abilities across languages. However, since most studies with bilinguals focused on bilingual children in second language contexts, little is known about whether such cross-language influence of PA on L2 reading occurs for children learning an L2 in a foreign language context, as is the case for Korean children
learning English as a foreign language through formal schooling. Thus, this study aims to examine Korean elementary EFL learners’ early reading skills and investigate whether their PA in either language is related to their English word reading abilities. Such analyses will provide much needed insights about early English literacy instruction for Korean EFL learners.

II. BACKGROUND

Phonological awareness (PA) is an understanding that words are made up of different sounds and is often reflected in one’s ability to manipulate or segment different sound units of the words, such as syllable, phoneme and rhyme. Past research in reading development has continuously shown that PA is a significant predictor of children’s early reading acquisition in diverse languages (Adams, 1990; Bryant, MacLean., & Bradley, 1990; Cronin & Carver, 1998; Goswami & Bryant, 1990; MacLean, Bryant, & Bradley, 1987; Stanovich, 1992; Stanovich & Siegel, 1994; Vellutino & Scanlon, 2001; Wagner et al., 1997). For example, previous studies with English-acquiring children have shown that lower level phonological skills such as syllable and onset-rhyme awareness are almost prerequisites of reading development (Goswami & Mead, 1992). Also, PA turned out to be a powerful predictor of both speed and efficiency of overall reading acquisition (Share, Jorm, Maclean, & Matthews, 1984). In general, studies that examine the relationship between PA and reading development in monolingual children have identified varying levels of predictive power of PA in different phonological units on reading, and have highlighted PA to be the strongest and the most reliable predictor of decoding ability (Bowers, 1995; Bowers & Wolf, 1993; Mann, 1984; Wagner et al., 1994).

Studies which examined the PA skills of Korean native speaking monolingual children have shown that body-coda units are the most basic and salient features of the Korean language (Cho & McBride-Chang, 2005; Kim, 2007; Yi, 1998; Yoon et al., 2002), a phenomenon that is distinct from what has been observed with children acquiring other languages. In other words, language-specific properties of PA development are identified. More specifically, body-coda structure with consonant-vowel-consonant [CV-C], e.g., go-m) is a more salient subsyllabic structure than onset-rhyme (C-VC, e.g., g-om) for Korean native speakers, while the contrary is true for English native speakers. Despite the L1-specific sensitivity to a particular phonological unit that is not often recognized in other languages, the facilitative role of PA for reading abilities was identified with Korean children. For example, in relation to the word reading abilities of Korean children, Yoon and her colleagues (2002) showed that Korean children might use an analogy of the body unit in pseudoword reading. Similarly, Kim (2007) analyzed Korean monolingual early
The Role of Phonological Awareness in Korean Elementary EFL Learners’ Word Reading

readers’ PA skills in relation to their word reading skills and found that children’s body-coda awareness is an important predictor of word decoding and spelling in learning the Korean language. Thus the significant relationship between PA and reading skills is present in Korean-acquiring monolingual children as well.

There has been a growing interest in the PA skills of bilingual children and L2 learners as well (Loizou & Stuart, 2003). Such studies have shown that PA in one language is significantly related to, and in most cases is the strongest predictor of reading abilities in bilingual children (Comeau, Cormier, Grandmaison, & Lacroix, 1999; Durgunoğlu, 2002; Durgunoğlu, Nagy, Hancin-Bhatt, 1993; Geva & Wang, 2001; Gottardo, Yan, Siegel, & Wade-Wooley, 2001; Lindsey et al., 2003). For example, Comeau and his colleagues (1999) investigated English-French bilingual children’s PA and reading abilities and revealed the presence of a cross-language transfer of phonological processing skills and reading performance. Specifically, they showed that PA skills in children’s L1 transferred to their L2 reading, thus supporting the hypothesis that phonological processing skills transfer across languages and across tasks. Similarly, Branum-Martin and his colleagues (2006) showed that English and Spanish PA variables were related to each other and to word reading, both within and across languages for Spanish-English bilingual kindergarteners. Lafrance and Gottardo (2005) also showed that French-English bilingual children’s PA skills in both French and English were uniquely predictive of reading abilities in the two languages, after controlling for the influences of children’s cognitive ability, emergent literacy skills and language abilities.

However, these studies that provided evidence for the transfer of PA and word reading skills in two languages have mostly compared languages that are both alphabetic, sharing the same Roman alphabets, such as English and Spanish, and English and French. Thus, not as much is known about the relationship between L1 and/or L2 PA and L2 reading competence of bilinguals or L2 learners who are acquiring phonologically and orthographically distinct two languages, such as Korean-English bilinguals or Korean English learners. The few studies that did explore the potential effects of the degree of similarities between the two languages that are being acquired have revealed mixed findings: There has been a finding that Chinese PA was a significant predictor for English reading beyond the variance accounted for by English PA for Cantonese-English bilingual children (Gottardo, Yan, Siegel, & Wade-Wooley, 2001). On the other hand, some researchers showed that such cross-language and cross-task transfer was observed only in bilinguals acquiring two languages that share the same writing system (Bialystok, Luk, & Kwan, 2005).

Although relatively less attention has been paid to the facilitative role of PA for early reading skills in Korean-English bilinguals or Korean English learners, the few existing studies are in agreement regarding the presence of significant relationship between PA and
reading competence within and across the two languages (Cho & Lee, 2004; Cho & McBride-Chang, 2005; Han & Lee, 2003; Wang et al., 2006). Cho and McBride-Chang (2005), for example, investigated how Korean native speaking children’s phonological processing abilities relate to their reading skills in English. They examined associations between PA and word reading in Korean and English in a one-year longitudinal study of second grade Korean EFL learners in Korea. They found significant correlations among the PA measures in two languages and also showed that the most powerful predictors of English word recognition were the ages of children in the second grade and phoneme awareness in English. Similarly, Wang and her colleagues (2006) examined the relationship between PA and orthographic skills in first and second grade Korean-English bilingual children in terms of their reading ability in the two languages. In addition to the significant correlations between L1 and L2 PA skills, they found that children’s Korean phonological skill was a significant predictor for English reading. Furthermore, they argued for a cross-language PA transfer across languages that are typologically very different. However, both studies described above did not control for the influences of the Korean participants’ overall English oral language proficiency, which may play an important role in their phonological processing and literacy task performance as documented in other research with English-speaking children (Chaney, 1992; Goswami, 2001; Metsala, 1999; Metsala & Walley, 1998). In addition, as a large number of Korean students receive English exposure or instruction outside school, relying on tutoring and private language institutions, such factors need to be taken into consideration in order to provide an accurate picture of the role of L1 and L2 PA in their L2 early reading abilities.

Thus, the present study attempts to understand the relationship between PA in the two languages in Korean elementary EFL learners and investigate whether the facilitative role of L1 and L2 PA in L2 reading skill is still present when their English proficiency and informal English-learning experiences are accounted for.

III. METHOD

1. Participants

The participants were 113 (66 boys and 47 girls) Korean fourth graders attending a local public elementary school in Seoul, Korea. They were recruited from four different fourth grade classrooms, and every student in those four classrooms participated in the study, in order to ensure representation of diverse English-learning backgrounds within the whole student body. The fourth graders in this study had been learning English at school through TETE (Teaching English Through English) approach from the third grade.
The Role of Phonological Awareness in Korean Elementary EFL Learners’ Word Reading

2. Measures

The measures administered in this study included PA tasks, word- and pseudoword reading, oral language comprehension measured by a listening comprehension test, and receptive vocabulary in English. Their Korean PA in four different phonological units was also assessed in order to investigate whether L1 PA makes any contribution to their L2 reading.

1) Phonological awareness tasks

Phoneme matching task of the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (Wagner et al., 1999) and rhyme matching task of PAL-RW (Beringer, 2001) were used to assess children’s English phoneme and rhyme awareness, respectively. For both tests, they were asked to choose a picture among three different choices, that had the same beginning sound as the word they heard (phoneme awareness task) and that rhymed with the word they heard (rhyme awareness task). There were ten items in each task, and each correct answer scored one point. The maximum possible score was thus ten for the two English PA tasks. In assessing their Korean PA, they were tested on syllable, rhyme, body-coda, and phoneme awareness tasks. Since standardized tests for these constructs are not yet developed in Korean, the PA test battery developed by Kim (2009) was adapted. The Cronbach’s alpha for these measures were all above .87. The content and format of these tests were similar to their English counterparts, as the students were told to choose the odd word among the three words they heard in the target phonological units. Each of the three words in the test items were represented by pictures in order to minimize any ambiguities and to allow them to simply point to their selected choice. Each Korean PA test contained 15 items, with each correct answer scoring one point. Therefore, the maximum possible score a child could receive on each test was 15.

2) Vocabulary

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Tasks-III (PPVT-III; Dunn & Dunn, 1997) was used to test students’ receptive vocabulary in English. Students were asked to point to the correct picture, among the four choices that corresponded to the vocabulary word given. The test terminated when the student made five consecutive errors. Each correct item was given 1 point.

3) Word reading and Pseudoword reading
English word- and pseudoword-reading were measured with Word Identification and Word Attack sections of the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests-Revised (Woodcock, 1987). Children were shown one word at a time and were told to read the word aloud as best they could. The tests contained 50 items for the word reading and 40 items for the pseudoword reading tasks, and each correct answer scored one point. The test was stopped when the students gave incorrect responses for five consecutive words.

4) Oral language comprehension

In order to measure students’ overall comprehension of English, their scores on the listening comprehension test that was administered school-wide was used. There were total 50 items on the test, and it was a typical listening comprehension test containing a range of items including those that assess students’ microskills such as distinguishing different sounds and word meanings to those that test more macro-level oral skills such as choosing sociolinguistically and culturally appropriate responses in the given situations and comprehending conversations in extended discourse. Each correct answer scored one point.

3. Procedure

All testing took place in a separate classroom in the school. Students were tested individually on the range of measures. In addition to the tests that were administered, the students were also interviewed by trained researchers to collect information about their English-learning backgrounds. In particular, they were asked whether they learn English outside school, from whom and for how many hours per week, whether they learned English outside school in the past or before entering elementary school, from whom and for how many hours per week for how many months, whether they have been to English-speaking countries and for how long, how many books they read in English per week on their own, at what age they started to get constant exposure to English, and so on. Their responses to the interview questions were used as control variables in the later analyses.

After first observing the overall relationships among the measures, in the subsequent regression analyses, students’ performance on the English word- and pseudo-word reading tasks served as the dependent variables, and their PA scores on different phonological units in the two languages acted as the main question variables, as this study was designed specifically to explore the relationship between PA in L1 and L2 and L2 reading skills. The other measures, including children’s English vocabulary knowledge, English oral comprehension abilities, and other background variables such as the amount of time they
The Role of Phonological Awareness in Korean Elementary EFL Learners’ Word Reading

study English outside school and duration of oversea stay in an English-speaking country served as the control variables, to examine the predictive power of PA beyond the effects of those variables.

**IV. RESULTS**

As Table 1 shows, the participants in this study, on average, were studying English outside school through tutoring or enrollment in private language institutions for about 3.5 hours per week. The standard deviation was as big as the mean, indicating a wide range of such experiences and opportunities among the students. Similarly, the range of overseas experiences in English-speaking countries was quite large, ranging from no experience to four years of oversea stay. On average, students had about one-month experience abroad where they were exposed to English, but the standard deviation which was nearly five times bigger than the mean reflects the huge gap among the students in terms of overseas experiences. The look at the means and standard deviations in the amount of time the participants spend for outside-school English-learning and overseas experiences further highlights the need to use these factors as control variables to account for the differences in the amount of exposure to English in identifying the relationship between PA and early reading skills in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Means and Standard Deviations of Background and Literacy Variables</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of Oversea Stay (months)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours Studying English Outside School (hrs/wk)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Listening Comprehension</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Phonological Awareness</td>
<td>English Rhyme Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English Phoneme Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean Phonological Awareness</td>
<td>Korean Syllable Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Korean Body-Coda Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Korean Rhyme Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Korean Phoneme Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Word Reading</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Pseudoword Reading</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, the Korean EFL fourth grade students in this study, on average, performed well on the range of English and Korean emergent literacy measures examined, getting
more than 70% of the test items correct on each PA task. Although the minimum scores on each task indicate that there were students who were not yet reading in English or have PA in English and/or Korean, most students seemed to have quite a good grasp of oral comprehension in English as reflected in their listening comprehension performance. Interesting to note is that it was not only English PA students had difficulty with, as the minimum scores of Korean PA were equally quite low, suggesting that PA is not only related to language proficiency but to metalinguistic awareness in general (Chaney, 1992).

There was also a great variance in the students’ ability to correctly decode words. As hypothesized, students seemed to have more difficulties with pseudoword reading task, as they could not rely on their knowledge of sight words or memory. This corroborates previous claims that pseudoword reading is a better and more accurate reflection of decoding skills than word reading tasks (Oller et al., 1998).

In order to examine any potential associations among the language and literacy measures within each language and also across the two languages, correlation analysis was conducted. As can be seen from Table 2, the duration of stay in English-speaking countries was only significantly correlated with students’ English oral comprehension ability ($r=.22$, $p<.01$), measured by an English listening comprehension test, and their pseudoword reading ability ($r=.22$, $p<.01$). It did not show any significant relation with students’ PA in either language. Likewise, the amount of time they devoted in studying English outside school had significant relationship with English vocabulary only ($r=.30$, $p<.001$), and was not correlated to PA in either language or English reading skills. Further, the number of English books they read was not related to their emergent literacy skills measured in this study and was only marginally related to their receptive vocabulary knowledge in English. On the other hand, the size of their English vocabulary knowledge was not significantly related to their PA, although it did reveal a significant relationship with their English word ($r=.29$, $p<.001$) and pseudoword reading abilities ($r=.45$, $p<.001$). Thus, the more English words students knew, the better they were at decoding English. This contradicts previous studies that found close relationship between vocabulary knowledge and PA in English-speaking children. In fact, most studies with English-speaking children have shown that vocabulary knowledge is one of the strongest predictor of their PA (Goswami, 2001; Metsala, 1999; Metsala & Walley, 1998). Goswami (2001) attributed the relationship between vocabulary and PA to lexical restructuring processes. That is, as children pick up more and more words, they are required to distinguish similar-sounding words and re-represent their phonological segmentations in order to differentiate them. This lexical restructuring process further promotes children’s PA, as it requires them to attend to smaller sound segments in words. Thus, PA is strengthened through oral vocabulary growth. Since there has been little attention paid to the role of vocabulary knowledge in PA development of L2 learners or bilinguals, it is difficult to explain such
# TABLE 2
Correlations among Phonological Awareness and Other Emergent Literacy Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Time Spent on Studying English (Hrs/Week)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Oversea Stay</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. # of English Books Read</td>
<td>0.18~</td>
<td>0.2*</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. English Vocabulary</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.3***</td>
<td>0.19~</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. English Rhyme Awareness</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.17~</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. English Phoneme Awareness</td>
<td>0.17~</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.43***</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Korean Syllable Awareness</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.17~</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Korean Body Awareness</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.31***</td>
<td>0.32***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Korean Rhyme Awareness</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Korean Phoneme Awareness</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.27***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. English Listening Comprehension</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.35***</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. English Word Reading</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.29***</td>
<td>0.49***</td>
<td>0.27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. English Pseudoword Reading</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.19~</td>
<td>0.45***</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

~p<.10  *p<.05  **p<.01  ***p<.001
absence of relationship between vocabulary knowledge and PA for the participants in this study. However, it can well be attributed to the foreign language, as opposed to second language, context in which the students learned English. That is, the relatively less exposure to the target language and thus fewer opportunities to engage in lexical restructuring process may explain such lack of facilitative relationship. More research attention to this phenomenon is in need to provide evidence for this account.

On the whole, the result of the correlation analysis between the control variables and the PA and reading measures revealed absence of relationship between PA and the control variables, thus suggesting that PA is not something that is naturally acquired but needs some explicit training (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Lundberg et al., 1988).

The students’ English PA in the two phonological units (phoneme and rhyme) were significantly correlated with each other \((r=.43, p<.001)\), and most of the Korean PA pairs showed significant correlations as well. Although English PA was significantly correlated to Korean PA, neither English phoneme nor rhyme awareness was related to Korean rhyme awareness. More interestingly, there was no cross-language transfer for rhyme and phoneme awareness in English and Korean. This is contradictory to previous studies (Cisero & Royer, 1995; Branun-Martín et al., 2006; Dickinson et al., 2004; Durgunoğlu, 1998) and suggests students’ unawareness of the possibility of language transfer and implies for the need of such training at the same time.

In order to examine whether English and Korean PA contribute to students’ English reading abilities, higherarchical regression analyses were conducted for English word and pseudoword reading separately. The pseudoword reading reflects students’ ability to decode words that are novel to them, thus controlling for the effects of sight word reading or memory effects (Oller et al., 1998). For both word and pseudoword reading, the duration of students’ stay in English-speaking countries, amount of time they devote in learning and studying English, the number of books they read in English, their English vocabulary knowledge, and their listening comprehension skills in English were entered, in order, as control variables. In both cases, the number of hours they spend for receiving English tutoring and/or attending private English institutions contributed a significant amount of variance after controlling for the effects of their studying-abroad experiences, which did not contribute significantly to their reading skills. The number of English books they read outside school did not explain additional variance in English reading skills once their study time and oversea experience were taken into consideration, but their English vocabulary knowledge contributed unique amount of variance, explaining as much as 6% and 17% of additional variance for English word and pseudoword reading, respectively. Thus, when controlling for the effects of out-of-school English-learning experiences, students’ English vocabulary knowledge was a significant predictor for their reading skills. Students’ oral comprehension skill in English turned out to predict a significant proportion
of variance in English word reading, even after controlling for the effects of the other control variables, but it was not the case for pseudoword reading. The five control variables together explained about 28% of the total variance in English word and pseudoword reading.

### TABLE 3
Regression Analysis Predicting English Word and Pseudoword Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$R$</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
<th>$\Delta F$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>English Word Reading</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Oversea Stay (Months)</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hours Spent on Studying English (Week)</td>
<td>.283</td>
<td>.080</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>7.56**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td># of English Books Read per Week</td>
<td>.304</td>
<td>.093</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>English Vocabulary Knowledge</td>
<td>.390</td>
<td>.152</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>6.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>English Listening Comprehension</td>
<td>.526</td>
<td>.277</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>14.78***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>English Phonological Awareness</td>
<td>.602</td>
<td>.362</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>5.62**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Korean Phonological Awareness</td>
<td>.671</td>
<td>.450</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>3.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>English Pseudoword Reading</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Oversea Stay (Months)</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hours Spent on Studying English (week)</td>
<td>.233</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>.053</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td># of English Books Read per Week</td>
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<td>.085</td>
<td>.030</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>English Vocabulary Knowledge</td>
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<td>.251</td>
<td>.166</td>
<td>19.31***</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>.032</td>
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<td>2.39~</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Korean Phonological Awareness</td>
<td>.635</td>
<td>.400</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>2.63*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

~$p<.10$  *$p<.05$  **$p<.01$  ***$p<.001$

When the effects of all of these control variables were controlled for, English PA proved a significant predictor for English word reading, contributing as much as 9% of unique variance, but only a marginally significant predictor for pseudoword reading. Most importantly, the participants’ Korean PA predicted a significant amount of variance in both English word and pseudoword reading over and above all the control variables and English PA. In other words, the predictive power of Korean PA was over and beyond that of English PA and other control variables. This is in line with previous studies that revealed facilitative role of L1 PA in L2 reading for bilinguals acquiring typologically similar two languages or L2 learners learning L2 in second language contexts (DaFontoura & Siegel, 1995; Dickinson et al., 2004; Geva, Yaghoub-Zadeh, & Schuster, 2000; Lafrance & Gottardo, 2005; Quiroga et al., 2002). Students’ English and Korean PA, together with the control variables, accounted for 45% and 40% of the variance in English word and pseudoword reading, respectively.
V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the role of L1 and L2 phonological awareness in Korean EFL elementary students’ English reading skills. The amount of time students received English exposure and instruction through tutoring and private-institution experiences and their oral language skills did turn out to be important predictors for their English reading skills. In general, those students who went through English private tutoring tended to perform better on English reading tasks. However, most important to note is that their English PA contributed significantly beyond the effects of those out-of-school factors in predicting their English reading skills and that their Korean PA was a significant predictor over and above the effects of English PA. These findings are in accordance with previous studies with English-speaking bilinguals which revealed cross-language contribution of L1 PA to L2 reading (Gottardo et al., 2001; Shwartz et al., 2005). The findings also strengthen the cross-language and cross-task relationship between PA and reading competence observed in Korean English learners (Cho & Lee, 2004; Han & Lee, 2003) by providing strong evidence that students’ L1 and L2 PA are stronger predictors than their oral language proficiency or amount of English-schooling. At the same time, the findings have important implications for English literacy instruction for Korean elementary EFL learners. It is true that a big proportion of Korean students rely on private tutoring and language instruction outside schools to promote their English language and literacy skills these days. This further leads to educational inequalities and a huge gap in English abilities among the students of even same ages, which creates challenges for the teachers to provide adequate instruction for all students. However, the findings from this study suggest that given such huge diversities in English-learning experiences among children, good PA instructions and training for not only English, but also Korean, will promote students’ reading success in English, despite the differences in the amount of English exposure students get outside school. In fact, the effectiveness of PA training on reading development has been documented in numerous studies (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Lundberg et al., 1988; Wagner & Rashotte, 1993), including those in the Korean EFL context (Han & Cha, 2007; Park & Jeong, 2005). In particular, researchers have shown that higher level skills including phoneme awareness can be developed by early PA training (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Ehri, 1998).

Previous studies with bilingual children have shown that L1 PA often transfers to L2 PA tasks, and vice versa (Bramum-Martin et al., 2006; Cisero & Royer, 1995; Dickinson et al., 2004; Durgunoglu, 1998). Some studies, however, indicated that not all bilinguals transfer their PA between the two languages. Bialystok, McBride-Chang and Luk (2005), for example, showed that PA developed in response to language exposure and instruction and that it transferred across languages only when it is fully established in their language...
system. Some (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1999) claim that ESL/EFL students need explicit instruction and that PA is transferable across languages in promoting successful L2 reading. The correlation analysis in this study revealed an absence of significant relationship between L1 and L2 PA, even for the same phonological units in the two languages. That is, there was no association between the participants’ phoneme awareness in English and Korean; nor was there any relationship between their rhyme awareness in the two languages. This suggests that their metalinguistic awareness, especially that which requires them to attend to different sound units, is underdeveloped and not yet well established to allow for a language transfer that can further promote their English reading skills. At the same time, it calls for the need of explicit instruction on PA.

In order to obtain a more accurate account of Korean EFL learners’ literacy skills in relation to their PA in the two languages, and to gain more insights into the interplay of phonological and orthographical differences in the two languages in relation to their reading abilities, however, a longitudinal study with a bigger sample across different ages and grade levels is necessary. Nevertheless, this study made an important step forward in highlighting the significance of L1 metalinguistic awareness for L2 literacy development and the need to provide explicit PA instruction for Korean elementary EFL learners to foster their English decoding skills that will play a crucial role in their later reading comprehension abilities.

References


189-216.


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