

Linking knowledge of L2 sounds and L2 reading comprehension

What this research was about and why it is important

Poor L2 reading comprehension is a significant barrier to progression in L2. This study investigated the relationship between knowledge of L2 sounds, and L2 reading comprehension. The researcher drew on theories of working memory, which claim that successful processing of texts for meaning depends on our ability to hold just-read material temporarily, in the form of sound. She therefore tested knowledge of L2 English sounds, among two groups of French secondary schoolchildren. The groups had similar levels of reading comprehension in L1 French, and both groups could decode English sentences. However, they differed significantly in text-level reading comprehension in English. When tested for their knowledge of L2 sounds, the study found that the good comprehenders were much better at distinguishing between similar L2 sound patterns, than the poor comprehenders. The researcher argues that a good knowledge of the L2 sound system plays a central role in processing L2 written text. Instruction which promotes knowledge of the spoken language is therefore directly supportive of L2 reading development.

What the researchers did

- The researcher recruited two groups of learners of English, in a French secondary school.
- One group was in their fourth year of learning English (4-year group), the other was in their seventh year (7-year group).
- The learners completed sentence decoding tests, and reading comprehension tests, in L1 French and in L2 English. These tests were carefully designed to be accessible for the lower (4-year) group.
- The learners were also tested for their knowledge of sets L2 French and L2 English sounds (a set of dissimilar sounds, and a set of similar sounds). These tests involved hearing short lists of words of one syllable, containing similar/dissimilar sets of sounds, and then being asked to reproduce the lists in writing.
- The researcher compared the learners' performance on the various tests of sounds, with their performance in reading comprehension in French and in English.

What the researchers found

- The two groups of learners performed similarly, on all tests in their first language (French).
- They also performed similarly, on the test of dissimilar sounds in L2 English, and in decoding English sentences.
- However on the test of L2 English comprehension, and the test of similar L2 English sounds, the performance of the groups was different; the 7-year group were much better than the 4-year group, on average, on both these tests.

Things to consider

- The researcher concluded that the 7-year group had a sounder grasp of the L2 English sound system, and that this was the reason for their better performance in English reading comprehension.
- The researcher interpreted her results as supporting the claims of working memory theorists, regarding the nature of the reading process (and in particular, that print is interpreted momentarily as sound, before it can be processed for meaning).
- The researcher argues that strengthening learners' knowledge of the L2 sound system, through training in the spoken language, can make a stronger contribution to their L2 reading development, than instruction in reading strategies: "Good L1 readers do not need to learn how to comprehend in order to become good L2 readers, but this study has shown that they do need to be better at mentally representing spoken language" (p. 470).
- She also speculates that explicit teaching of L2 phonemes can make a contribution, though the study offers no direct evidence on this.