



<http://www.corwinpress.com/>

Reviewed work:

Teaching Reading to English Language Learners: A Reflective Guide. (2009). Thomas S. C. Farrell. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Pp. 120. ISBN 9781412957359. \$23.95

Reviewed by
Alex Poole

Western Kentucky University
United States

As the director of a teaching English as a second language (TESL) program, I serve the needs of current and future teachers with disparate professional goals. On the one hand, there are those whose goal is to teach limited English proficiency (LEP) children in P-12 (i.e., preschool-12th grade) settings in the United States. On the other hand, there are students who wish to teach adults in community colleges in the United States and universities abroad. For the former group, there are scores of texts, many of which include information on curriculum issues, child development, and assessment, in addition to second language (L2) reading methods. Moreover, such texts integrate national reading standards as well as relatively new federal requirements outlined by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy. However, for the latter group, most of whom have no need to learn about P-12 issues, there are few texts that simultaneously explain the theoretical foundations of L2 literacy development and provide practical tools to implement reading instruction to adult learners of English as a second or foreign language. Fortunately, Thomas S. C. Farrell's *Teaching Reading to English Language Learners: A Reflective Guide* is a resource that fills this dearth.

The book contains nine chapters, the first of which touches on the variables that influence the rate and route of L2 reading development, and then summarizes all subsequent chapters. Chapter

2 asks readers to articulate their view of how L2 reading acquisition occurs, which leads into a discussion of various instructional models. The following four chapters concern fluency and comprehension, reading strategies, text structure, and vocabulary, respectively. Each chapter reviews the relevant literature and provides suggestions for instruction. Chapter 7 gives future teachers guidelines for developing reading lessons and curricula, while chapter 8 explains extensive reading (ER) and discusses its role in the curriculum. Finally, chapter 9 condenses the types of traditional and alternative classroom reading assessments available to teachers.

In this review, rather than detailing each chapter in the entire book, I will instead point out its positive and negative features with reference to specific chapters. Overall, the text is a worthy investment because it presents essential aspects of L2 reading theory and instruction, is clearly written, contains illustrative graphics, and incorporates useful reflection questions. However, the lack of resources for further reading, commonsensical nature of some of its sections, and absence of issues related to public school children limit the text's usefulness.

First, each chapter details an essential aspect of L2 reading theory and instruction of which many new teachers are probably not aware. For instance, in chapter 1, "Teaching Reading to ELLs," Farrell discusses the reasons why English language learners (ELLs) have difficulty reading in English, highlighting areas such as first language (L1) and L2 dissimilarities, age, learning styles, and cultural schemata. In addition, he points out that L2 learners' reading strategies and habits will be influenced not only by the text structures in their L1 but also by their beliefs about the reading process in general.

Similarly, chapter 2, "Reflecting on the Reading Process," deals with fundamental ways in which reading is thought to occur. Specifically, Farrell shows how top-down, bottom-up, and interactive processing models account for literacy development in an L2, thereby helping to dispel the widely-held belief among novice teachers, in my experience, that there is a singular best way in which reading instruction should take place.

In chapter 3, "Teaching Reading Fluency and Comprehension to ELLs," Farrell discusses the counterintuitive fact that learners who read slowly and avoid errors are just as likely to misunderstand text as those who read rapidly with many errors. This point is especially important because experience has shown me that many new teachers believe that errors—grammatical, lexical, reading, pronunciation, or otherwise—reflect a poverty of L2 competence rather than a natural process in L2 development, which more than three decades of L2 research has taught us (Mitchell & Myles, 1998).

The ninth chapter, "Authentic Reading Assessment for ELLs," not only informs teachers about the traditional forms of assessment, such as multiple-choice, short-answer, and essay tests, but also discusses alternative and authentic types of assessment, like portfolios, peer assessments, and self-reports. Particularly strong was his explanation of how teachers can use anecdotal records to inform instruction and grading, an area which is not given enough attention in most reading and language testing texts.

Second, Farrell's treatment of the crucial features of L2 reading theory and instruction is also praiseworthy because his explanations are simple, avoid jargon that non-specialists will find

confusing, and are mainly free of citations of methodologically complex empirical research. In chapter 1, for instance, Farrell introduces the topic of contrastive analysis without even mentioning the term, but instead uses language that captures its essence without requiring the reader to constantly consult an applied linguistics dictionary: “Another aspect of linguistic differences between two languages that teachers of ELLs may want to consider, because it may influence second language reading comprehension, concerns the differences between the ELLs’ first language and the second/subsequent language they are learning to read, in this case English” (p. 4).

Further examples of such clarity are found in chapters 3 and 4, in which he addresses the topics of schema and reading strategies, respectively. Specifically, when talking about schema, Farrell offers a clear explanation not only of what it is and how it affects students’ reading comprehension, but also of how new teachers can incorporate this information into curricula and lesson plans. With regard to reading strategies, Farrell’s account includes a theoretical rationale of why such strategies are important for successful reading, and a discussion of the goals of strategy instruction. The most notable facet of this chapter, however, concerns the guidelines he provides for teaching strategies, which minimize the use of buzzwords such as *metacognition*, and map out how to use specific strategies. For example, in his illustration of how to teach prediction, he defines it, shows why it is important, and supplies a step-by-step demonstration of how he taught it in Singapore.

Third, Farrell’s use of graphics adds to the lucidity of his main points and thereby gives readers a concrete way of knowing how to implement certain concepts in the classroom. This quality is particularly strong in chapter 5, “Teaching Text Structure to ELLs,” which incorporates graphics, such as semantic maps, in order to elaborate on ways of making L2 students sensitive to text organization. Likewise, chapter 2 presents a visual comparison of top-down and bottom-up approaches to L2 reading instruction.

A fourth, and final, positive aspect of the text is found in the reflection sections that are interspersed throughout each chapter. These reflections can be used to foster class discussions or for self-study. Moreover, such reflections can be used for various purposes. In chapter 5, for example, three reflection sections are presented, one to get readers thinking about text structures and discourse markers, one in which teachers compare their ideas about the process of teaching discourse markers with Farrell’s, and one in which they apply the discourse markers they learned about in the chapter. In chapter 8, “Promoting Extensive Reading for ELLs,” the reflections ask the reader to devise ways to motivate students to read and decide who (students or teachers) should choose reading materials and what the nature of the materials should be. These questions are preceded by a comprehensive explanation of ER and suggestions for evaluating its success such as making movie versions of books and writing letters to authors in order to highlight the positive and negative aspects of their texts.

While the volume possesses these four praiseworthy features (essential aspects of L2 reading theory and instruction, clarity of prose, graphics, and reflection questions), there are some limitations. The first concerns the reflection questions. While, as noted above, they are valuable, they would have been enhanced by a list of resources that readers could look to for further reading. This would have been helpful for newcomers who want to delve more deeply into

theoretical and pedagogical topics related to L2 reading yet do not know where to look. Similar texts such as Anderson's (1999) *Exploring Second Language Reading* include these kinds of resources; it is curious that Farrell's does not.

A second limitation revolves around the commonsensical nature of some sections. Specifically, some passages are so obvious that their necessity is questionable. An example of this is seen in chapter 7, "Planning Effective Reading Lessons for ELLs," in which Farrell claims that "reading classes should have a sustained period of actual reading, during which writing, speaking, and listening are not emphasized" (p. 74). To me, this statement is a truism.

Finally, while Farrell does not specify whether the book is designed to train teachers for a certain age group, it is not applicable for future P-12 teachers in the United States because it makes no mention of NCLB or TESL standards, as do other introductory literacy texts by authors such as Boyd-Batstone (2006) and Cummins, Brown, and Sayers (2007). Teachers do not have the luxury of ignoring these standards and legislation, since their ability to integrate them into the curriculum will directly affect students' success and, by extension, their own employment. Furthermore, Farrell does not address how to teach reading in content areas (math, science, social studies, language arts, etc.), which most teachers of LEP students are now required to do (Becker, 2001).

Despite these limitations—and there is no one volume that can meet the needs of all future teachers—Farrell's book is a valuable contribution. In addition, for the reasons listed above (thoroughness, clarity, graphics, and reflections), the text is worth incorporating into adult reading courses designed for future teachers of English as a second or foreign language who have little background in reading pedagogy and L2 acquisition research. In fact, the text's weaknesses could be compensated for with journal articles, websites, and audio-visual materials. Likewise, teacher trainers, who are often asked to suggest texts for self-study, can comfortably recommend this book.

References

- Anderson, N. (1999). *Exploring second language reading: Issues and strategies*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Becker, H. (2001). *Teaching ESL K-12: Views from the classroom*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Boyd-Batstone, P. (2006). *Differentiated early literacy for English language learners: Practical strategies*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Cummins, J., Brown, K., & Sayers, D. (2007). *Literacy, technology, and diversity*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Mitchell, R., & Myles, F. (1998). *Second language learning theories*. London: Arnold.

About the Reviewer

Alex Poole is an assistant professor of English and TESL program director at Western Kentucky University. E-mail: alex.poole@wku.edu