

Literacy and foreign language reading

Tony Ridgway
Queen's University

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to help to give the teacher of foreign language reading a way of coping with a common phenomenon in the reading class: students appear to have the linguistic proficiency to deal with a text, but are unable to do so because they are approaching it in an inappropriate way. It is argued that this problem relates to styles and attitudes in reading, and that these may be considered under the heading of literacy, or literacies. The article explores the relatively recent development of mass literacy internationally, and the differing concepts of literacy that exist within and between cultures. These may affect profoundly how a reader approaches a text. There is a need to make these different approaches explicit, and recommendations are made as to how to do this.

keywords: literacy, foreign or second language reading, contrastive rhetoric

Introduction

I can remember the only time I met my great-grandmother in about 1960. At the time she was 92 years old. Dressed in black, she looked to me like Queen Victoria, and lived in a house full of Victorian artifacts, still lit by gas. She asked me several questions, quite severely, which I answered obediently. I left most impressed.

Years later, in an abortive attempt to trace my ancestry, I bought a copy of my grandfather's birth certificate in Somerset House. Appearing in the place where his mother's signature should have been was a cross. I was shocked. This formidable woman could not even write her own name!

Many of us will not have to go back many generations to find illiterate ancestors -- mass literacy is fairly recent. In a lot of other countries it is more recent still, and for this and many other cultural reasons attitudes towards literacy may be very different from our own. Heath (1996: 5) points out that there is an assumption that we all hold similar notions about what literacy is like and what it is like to be literate. The thesis of this paper is that such an assumption (which tends to be based on cognitive, rather than socio-cultural considerations) will inhibit the progress of, for example, a Chinese student on an academic reading course. It is important to remove such assumptions in both student and teacher, and to identify how they affect styles and attitudes in reading.

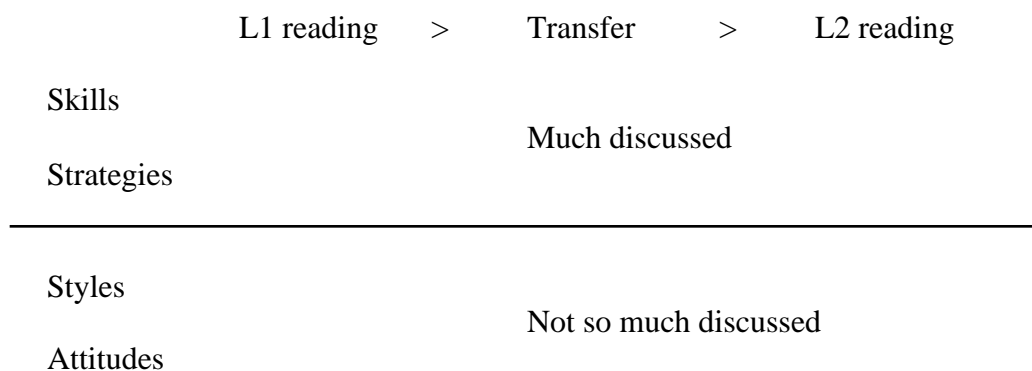
L1 and L2 reading and transferability: The importance of styles and attitudes

Much has been written about the transferability of first language (L1) reading skills and strategies to second language (L2) reading skills and strategies (see e.g., Alderson, 1984; Bernhardt, 1991; Bossers, 1991). There is some variation as to definitions of skills and strategies (Williams & Moran, 1989: 223; Urquhart & Weir, 1998: 96-98). Of particular importance in this context is the distinction between ends (e.g., guessing unknown words) and means (e.g., looking in the dictionary). After all, what is this, a hand-blender or a guacamole? The focus on skills and strategies reflects a cognitivist tendency of recent years, and there has been much discussion in this area. Less frequently discussed with relation to L2 reading are areas such as reading styles (Urquhart & Weir, 1998: 98-100) and attitudes, but now there is a renewed interest in affect (Arnold, 1999), which addresses more closely the state of mind with which L2 readers approach a text, as opposed to the mental operations that are performed while actually reading it. Heath (1996: 16) remarks:

Cognitive and behaviouristic theories that have dominated the Western psychology of learning and thinking, and especially their approaches to the teaching of reading and writing, have kept researchers from focusing into the cultural and historical contexts in which individuals of different societies learn.

The cognitive approach has been of great benefit to the study of L2 reading, giving us insights into decoding, the use of different orthographies, right up the linguistic hierarchy to discourse (cf. Bernhardt, 1991). This does not mean, however, that it is the end of the story. What is done after decoding is a pragmatic question, to do with inferencing and implicature, and this is where styles and attitudes come in. Attitudes present before reading also affect the all-important question of whether to abandon the text. We could represent this change of emphasis in a (by no means complete) schema as follows in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Orientations toward L1 reading to L2 reading transferability



We may characterise the dividing line between the two dyads above as being between cognitive and socio-cultural. However, we need to remember the Vygotskian principle that the combination of the "psycho-" and the "socio-" is not the same as the sum of its two parts, just as hydrogen plus oxygen does not equal water (cf. Kern, 2000: 16-18).

In what follows it will be argued that while the transferability of reading skills and strategies (cognitive) into L2 has been much discussed and investigated, far less consideration has been given to the transference of styles and attitudes (socio-cultural) to FL reading (there are many exceptions to this: see e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Tomlinson, 2000), and that while skills and strategies may represent universal cognitive faculties, the manner of their deployment (or non-deployment) may depend on these more subtle and anterior social influences. Again, while a monocultural definition of literacy might concentrate on the skills and strategies of reading, a definition with intercultural awareness would include styles and attitudes. This approach is very often characterised by the use of the plural "literacies" (Street, 1995). It may be that taking styles and attitudes into account will go some way towards explaining what Eskey (1973: 177) refers to as "the maddening experience of having a student who appears to understand every sentence and yet cannot answer a single question about the passage as a whole." Here perhaps lies the distinction which Heath (1996: 3) makes between literacy skills and literate behaviour.

What does literacy make possible?

In order to explore the concept of literacy as it applies to FL reading, we need to trace its historical context, if we believe with Vygotsky that this is the only way the mind can be properly perceived. One way of doing this is to explore the things it has done for us through history.

In 1968 Goody and Watt published an article called "The consequences of literacy", which made great claims for the influence of literacy on society and on psychology. The causative approach implicit in the title was an overstatement (as Goody admits in his introduction to the book) and there is much evidence to dispute their claims (Street, 1983). Despite this, grand claims continue to be made for literacy:

...oral and written cultures were indeed quite distinct and ...written language more than any other invention transformed society [into the] world that forms the basis of "civilisation" (Foster & Purves, 1996: 27).

Perhaps if Goody and Watt's claim had been less strong and formulated as "What does literacy make possible (but not necessarily have as a consequence)?" then many of their assertions would be worthy of consideration. Here is a list of some of the things which literacy makes possible, according to Goody and Watt:

- Trade in a money-based economy
- Social control (a written code of laws, and more recently, notices to regulate behaviour in public places)
- Orthodox religion (the Word of God)
- The ability to transcribe oral texts (poetry)

- Telecommunication (letters)
- The capacity to participate in generally accepted facts (science)
- Large-scale social organisation (cities)
- Access to information (as opposed to knowledge) from former times (history)
- Complex political systems (e.g., democracy)
- Specialisation of knowledge (individualisation through choice)

This impressive list certainly seems to support Foster & Purves's claim above about "civilisation". It is interesting though that most, if not all, of the above activities can be carried out with only restricted literacy, where a limited proportion of the population is literate. It is also interesting to note the different attitudes and reading styles that might be associated with the above literacies in different cultures, even within the same nation ("The Word of God" being a striking example). These kinds of literacy are often originally associated with pre-alphabetic scripts, and in such a society there is an emphasis on rote-learning. De Francis (1950) estimates that in China in 1950 only 10 to 15% of the population was literate. In such a society the text takes on a special, almost totemic status, as it has uncomprehended power, and the supernatural power of words in arcane religious or magical texts may be traced back to this period of restricted literacy (cf. Alan Maley's surprise at the totally different interpretations in China of words like "book", "reading", "literature" [1986: 103-104]).

The alphabet, in combination with the skill demands of the Industrial Revolution, led to demotic literacy. With an alphabetic script, speech can be much more closely transcribed, and the written form moves closer to the spoken form of the language (in Chinese, for example, it is still very distant). Suddenly, in a mass-literate society we are surrounded by text, much of which we don't wish to read. Thus, we develop a far more discerning attitude towards text, and learn techniques like skimming and scanning to lead us to the parts that we actually want to read.

Scribner and Cole (1981) found that different literacy practices were concerned with different activities in different languages in a Vai community, and that it was possible to associate a particular process, such as logical argument, not with literacy *per se*, but with literacy in a particular language, in this case English, or with other factors, such as schooling. They found that while there are definite cognitive skills associated with literacy, these skills are dictated by each culture and situation.

The different reading styles and attitudes involved in reading the forms enumerated in Goody and Watt's list and involved in modern mass literacy may give a historical perspective on the styles and attitudes students from other cultures, particularly more distant cultures, may bring to texts familiar to us. The terms "text-type" and "genre" are being avoided here as these tend to return us to the well-beaten cognitive route.

Phylogenetic and ontogenetic perspectives on literacy

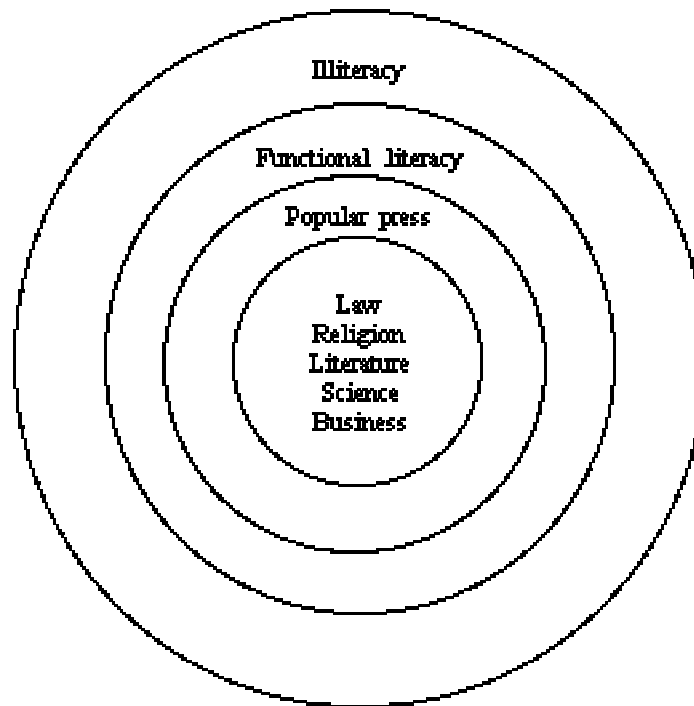
To develop further the historical perspective, there are some wider generalisations that can be made about the development of literacy in any particular culture (a phylogenetic, or diachronic view), and about the relative development of literacy in the individuals in any particular culture at a particular time (an ontogenetic, or synchronic view).

A phylogenetic perspective would pass from illiteracy to functional literacy (the development of a system of recording for the purposes of trade) to restricted literacy (a priest or scribe elite, magical texts, followed by the codification of a system of laws and a gubernatorial elite, followed by a literary and academic elite) to industrialisation and mass schooling and the rise of the popular press. Over time, there is a huge increase in vocabulary and a number of changes in rhetorical structure. Most written language becomes less bound to context, and consequently more abstract. One can plot these changes against each of the specific areas mentioned in the list above. The process is a dynamic and constantly changing one, as language adapts to circumstances and at the same time creates new possibilities. Certainly I am not literate in the activity of texting by mobile phone!

It is important not to go overboard here: of course Urquhart and Weir are correct in saying that the cognitive element is primary, and the social secondary (1998: 8). However, it may be that socially conditioned predispositions and attitudes pre-empt the engagement of the cognitive faculties (such as my own irrational aversion to mobile phones).

An ontogenetic perspective will have similarities and differences to a phylogenetic one. It may be schematically portrayed as follows in Figure 2.

Figure 2: An ontogenetic schema of literacy in society



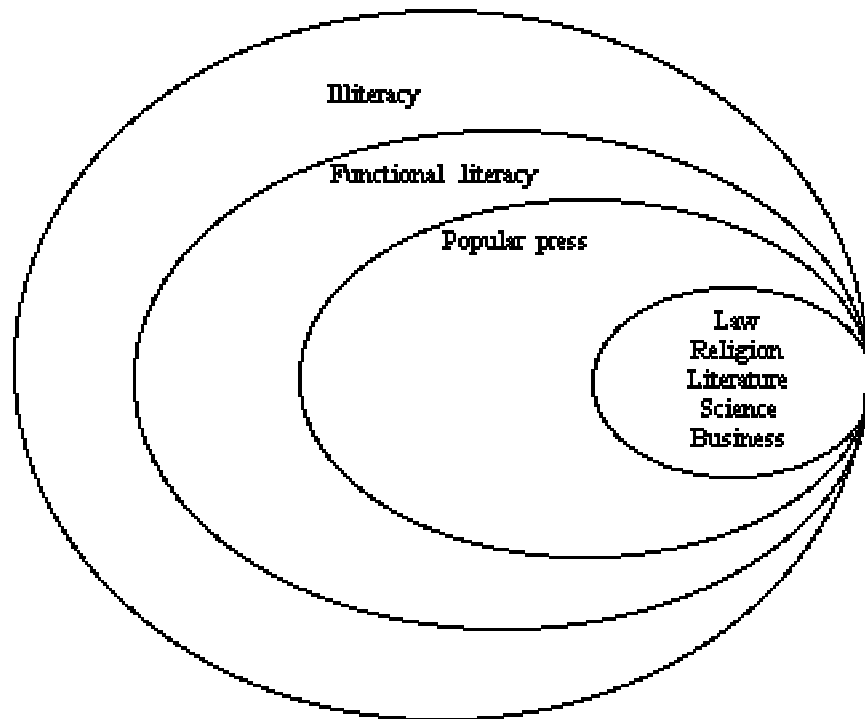
Here we use the metaphor of Centre and Periphery to distinguish among levels of society (and among these levels literacy and power are likely to have a close correspondence). The Centre, where power and literacy are at their highest levels, will include the elites of law, religion, academe, science and business. In countries where there is mass education, popular literary forms, typified by the popular press, will form the next circle. The third circle is occupied by people who read for their own immediate needs, reading items which are important in everyday life (e.g., signs, bills) which are very basic and probably below sentence level. The illiterate periphery, like all the circles, will vary in width depending on which society we are illustrating. It will decrease with mass education as the "popular" circle increases, for example.

Students from countries where mass literacy is only recently developed, or still developing, will retain some of the attitudes which apply in conditions of restricted literacy.

Literacy and development: Literacy styles and attitudes in transition

If we return to a phylogenetic perspective, and stretch the above diagram to include a developmental dimension, then the centre will be in the vanguard, followed by the other circles to the outer periphery of illiteracy, as below in Figure 3.

Figure 3: A developmental perspective of literacy in a society



In other words, in the history of literacy of any society, the centre will become literate first, allowing only functional literacy, if any, to the rest ("restricted literacy"). Only after industrialisation and the need for mass education will mass literacy and the popular press follow.

In any society there will be contrasts among levels of literacy, for example between rural and urban sections, with different proportions of central and peripheral elements. Attitudes towards literacy in any given society will also be affected by the general level of literacy in that society. Most societies have passed through a phase of restricted literacy, where because literacy is restricted to a religious or governmental elite, there is more likely to be a superstitious attitude towards literacy and text, where meaning is not necessarily communicated to any significant degree through the text, but the text, *per se*, becomes an object in its own right. Such attitudes may persist in relic forms through generations. Partially comprehended texts are treated as totems. Shakespeare is a good contemporary example of this attitude even in a highly literate society such as ours, where we still cannot boast many generations of literate forbears. One recalls John Mills, as the patriarch in the film *The Family Way*, warning his daughter around 1966 that reading is "bad for the brains". Whether idolatrous or superstitiously suspicious, irrational attitudes towards texts as such are relics of an age of restricted literacy.

Attitudes of a society with restricted literacy

Literacy has not always been regarded as a "good thing". In the Middle Ages literacy was equated with knowledge of Latin, and the Wycliffe translation of the Bible into the vernacular led to radical preaching and the political and economic ferment which followed the Black Death, with the involvement of John Ball and the Lollards. In the early stages of its development, literacy has often, if not always, been restricted to an elite which has jealously guarded it. Under Henry VIII, Thomas More banned labourers and women from reading the Bible (Venezky, 1996: 62), and in antebellum America it was a criminal offence to teach a slave to read (Eddie Williams, personal communication). Even Don Quixote goes mad by reading. The very concept of the power of words in spells goes back to the days of the priest or scribe literate elite, as these words lay in texts which only the sorcerer had access to. The ability to read sacred scriptures did not necessarily imply comprehension of their content (Foster & Purves, 1996: 29). Writing (e.g., on astrology in Madagascar) can be a deliberate mystification of everyday life (Bloch, 1998).

Culture-specific literacies

The attitude referred to above is one which is associated with a culture in which there is restricted literacy. The argument thus far has been that there is a phylogenetic development which is roughly common to all cultures. This is an oversimplification -- there are many features of individual cultures which are not universally repeated in the process of development. In societies with ideographic scripts, for example, the costs of attaining literacy have been higher than in those with alphabetic scripts. More time was required to learn the thousands of characters necessary (3,000 to be reasonably literate, out of a total repertoire of 50,000 [Goody & Watt, 1968: 36]), and time was not a commodity possessed by the lower classes, so social mobility was problematised. In China there was a "nexus between restricted literacy and the existence of a proto-bureaucratic, highly-centralised state" (Foster & Purves, 1996: 30). *Wen yen* (ideographic script) provided a common idiom for law and administration in the huge empire with a multitude of languages that was China. The literary language (completely different from the vernacular) was crucial in the preservation of "high culture" which included religious traditions and texts, science and technology, magic and divination. In calligraphy, *wen yen* had its own aesthetic appeal (Foster & Purves, 1996: 31-32). *Pin yin* (alphabetic script) has only been introduced in this century, allowing near-universal literacy in modern China.

In the early Islamic world, literacy was also restricted. The Qur'an, as Word of Allah, was not translated, so the script would be mastered but reading would take place without comprehension in non-Arabic speaking countries. "Reading" was recitation with magical efficacy. These earlier traditions still exert a powerful influence on language and literary policies (Foster & Purves 1996: 35). Middle Easterners will not write anything impolite about anyone else, as it is immoral to do so (Parker *et al.*, 1986: 95) and Arabs will easily give opinions, but facts are more reluctantly divulged (Parker *et al.*, 1986: 97). *How* one says something is almost as important as *what* one says (Parker *et al.*, 1986: 98).

Culturally specific literacies, then, display differences which are both cognitive and social.

Contrastive rhetoric

Urquhart & Weir (1998) include both text structure and cohesion under the category of literacy. Both of these aspects have to do with rhetorical structure. 'Rhetoric', according to Connor (1999) has similar connotations to 'text linguistics', 'discourse linguistics', 'discourse analysis' and 'pragmalinguistics', all of which have to do with these areas, although, as Urquhart and Weir point out, coherence is "...rather more difficult and obscure than is sometimes recognised" (1998: 76). Contrastive rhetoric is the study of linguistic and cultural differences in this area. One characterisation of such cultural differences comes from Kaplan (1966). In a series of now-famous diagrams he characterises five patterns of paragraph: in English as a straight line, in Semitic languages as a zigzag, in Oriental languages as a spiral, and so on. This was crude, and accused of being ethnocentric, which Kaplan later admitted and altered his diagrams. His position was not necessarily a Whorfian one about different thought-processes, but, to quote Folman & Sarig (1990, quoted in Connor 1996) "but more -- [we] would like to suggest within the realm of the professed and implemented syllabuses of language arts and educational linguistics of each of the instructional systems, the formal agents of each of the cultures." Scribner & Cole (1981) found that children schooled in English performed better on tests in syllogisms, but this was better accounted for by the fact that they had been to school than by the fact that they were literate in a so-called "logical" language. Cultural value-judgments may be implicit in the choice of a rhetorical style or approach. Li (1996) compared the comments and observations of two Chinese and two American teachers on six pieces of narrative writing, three Chinese and three English. Some of the findings were as follows:

1. Chinese teachers considered writing as a vehicle for disseminating the accepted values of a society, whereas American teachers "consider morality the last place for teachers to exert their authority."
2. American teachers valued the originality of a writer's voice where Chinese allowed imitation.
3. Americans did not care for the expression of too much emotion in writing. Chinese considered this a good sign in writing.
4. Chinese expected "moral tags" in good writing. Americans preferred "showing" to "telling."
5. Americans considered formal and overly ornate language phony and preferred "natural" language. In Chinese the difference between written and spoken language is still large (Li, 1996, quoted from Connor, 1996).

Findings like the above need to take into account questions of attitudes and styles in the context of literacy, and it is important to remember that teachers need to become aware of their own attitudes and styles as well as those of their students. The comments above apply to narrative texts; it is interesting to speculate how attitudes and styles would differ with reference to other text-types. It has, for example, been pointed out (Widdowson, 1978; Connor, 1996) that

scientific texts transcend cultural barriers and form a culture of their own (this of course still being a culture that needs to be learnt).

Purpose in reading also is of crucial importance. Heath (1996: 5) makes the vital distinction between acquisition (e.g., learning to read) and retention and expansion (e.g., reading to learn). This of course raises the question whether it is possible to do both at the same time.

Another area of great interest is the idea of going beyond the text -- meaning for action, ideas and ideology -- critical reading. It is a contention of this article that awareness of literacy and literacies is a crucial part the kind of awareness while reading which is recommended by advocates of critical reading, such as Wallace (1992).

Conclusions

1. Literacy is a multifarious skill which includes skills, strategies, styles and attitudes.
2. Within the accomplishments required for literacy we can distinguish between cognitive and socio-cultural elements.
3. Cognitive elements have been treated more comprehensively than socio-cultural ones, and cultural differences correspondingly less emphasised.
4. Socio-cultural elements such as styles and attitudes may have a part to play in pre-empting the engagement of the cognitive ones.
5. The effects of literacy on any society are enormous, and manifest themselves in a number of ways. Approaches to texts are thus likely to differ greatly depending on a number of factors, such as the degree of development of a culture and its own idiosyncratic features (e.g., orthography, discourse structure). In particular, if a student comes from a background where there is restricted literacy, or where there has been restricted literacy in the recent past, attitudes towards texts *per se* will differ.
6. Any individual will have a particular literacy (or network of literacies), depending on a number of factors, in particular cultural background and class background (the level of literacy possessed by parents). This will significantly affect attitudes towards texts.

Pedagogic implications

1. Diagnosis. Do any of your students seem to suffer from the problem of not getting global meaning, but understanding individual sentences, as mentioned by Eskey above? Do any of your students insist on having every word in a text explained to them? Do any of your students take every word of a written text as gospel, although it may be nonsense? Are they incapable of criticising a text? Are they unwilling to discuss a text?

Do they continually misunderstand despite appearing to have adequate linguistic proficiency? These are just some of the problems that may be literacy problems.

2. Introspection. In the context of the above arguments, are you able to uncover any attitudes or styles of reading that you may possess, hitherto unconsciously? Looking at the way you mark students' writing may be a help with this, as well as familiarity with writing in a different language.

3. Orientation. Talk about literacy with your students. Tell them how it is different in different cultures, and how they may be surprised at the attitudes we have towards texts, for example that we may treat them as tools rather than as founts of wisdom. Discuss with them the differences between the way they might approach a text and the way you might. It is important here to remove any sense of shame about students' backgrounds, remembering that it is only a few generations since we lived in a society with restricted literacy, and also that such a society may affect the attitudes of the literate towards texts as well as those of the illiterate or semi-literate.

4. Familiarisation. Present your students with a variety of texts -- advertisements, tabloid newspapers, magazines, technical, and academic texts, literary texts. Discuss how one's responses might differ to these texts, and how one would approach them differently. As in the last stage, your purpose in doing this must be very explicit, otherwise the students may just wonder why you didn't ask comprehension questions (a good example of textual analysis at this level is in Kress, 1999).

5. Critical reading. Encourage students to go away and read things and come back with their own impressions, in addition to their interpretation of how a native-speaking reader might react to them.

References

- Alderson, J. C. (1984). Reading in a foreign language: A reading problem or a language problem? In J.C. Alderson & A.H. Urquhart (Eds.), *Reading in a foreign language* (pp. 1-24). London: Longman.
- Arnold, J. (Ed.). (1999). *Affect in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernhardt, E. B. (1991). A psycholinguistic perspective on second language literacy. In J.H. Hulstijn & J.F. Matter (Eds.), *Reading in two languages*. *AILA Review*, 8, 31-44. Amsterdam: Free University Press.
- Bloch, M. (1998). *How they think we think*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Bossers, B. (1991). On thresholds, ceilings and short-circuits: The relation between L1 reading, L2 reading and L2 knowledge. In J. H. Hulstijn & J. F. Matter (Eds.), *Reading in two languages*. *AILA Review*, 8, 45-60. Amsterdam: Free University Press.

- Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Connor, U. (1999). Contrastive rhetoric: New research avenues. In *Language and literacies: British studies in applied linguistics*. Clevedon, UK: British Association for Applied Linguistics in association with Multilingual Matters.
- Day, R. R. & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Francis, J. (1950). *Nationalism and language reform in China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Eskey, D. B. (1973). A model program for teaching advanced reading to students of English as a foreign language. *Language Learning*, 23, 169-89.
- Folman, S. & Sarig, G. (1990). Intercultural rhetorical differences in meaning construction. *Communication and Cognition*, 23(1), 45-92.
- Foster, P. & Purves, A. (1996). Literacy and society with particular reference to the non-western world. In R. Barr, M. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P.D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research Vol II* (pp. 26-45). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Goody, J. & Watt, I. (1968). The consequences of literacy. In J. Goody (Ed.), *Literacy and traditional societies* (pp. 27-68). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1996). Society and literacy. In R. Barr, M. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P.D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research Vol II* (pp. 3-25). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning*, 16(1), 1-20.
- Kern, R. (2000). *Literacy and language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kress, G. (1999). Issues for a working agenda in literacy. In *Language and literacies: British studies in applied linguistics* (pp. 126-144). Clevedon, UK: British Association for Applied Linguistics in association with Multilingual Matters.
- Li, X.-M. (1996). *"Good writing" in cross-cultural context*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Maley, A. (1986). XANADU -- A miracle of rare device. In J.M. Valdes (Ed.), *Culture bound* (pp. 102-111). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Parker, O. D. and Educational Services Staff, AFME. (1986). Cultural clues to the middle eastern student. In J.M. Valdes (Ed.), *Culture bound* (pp. 94-101). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scribner, S. & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1983). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education*. London: Longman.
- Tomlinson, B. (2000). Polemic: Beginning to read forever. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 13(1), 523-38.
- Urquhart, A. H. & Weir, C. (1998). *Reading in a second language*. London: Longman.
- Venezky, R. L. (1996). The development of literacy in the industrialised nations of the West. In R. Barr, M. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research Vol II* (pp. 46-67). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wallace, C. (1992). *Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widdowson, H. G. (1978). *Teaching language as communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, E. & Moran, C. (1989). Reading in a foreign language at intermediate and advanced levels with particular reference to English. *Language Teaching*, 22, 217-28.

About the Author

Tony Ridgway has spent nearly 30 years teaching English in the UK, Spain, Iran and Cyprus. His main interest is reading, and he did a PhD on the role of background knowledge at Seville University in 1994. He was Head of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Queen's University from 1995 - 2002. He is now working as a school director and freelance consultant. e-mail: crescentschoolofenglish@yahoo.co.uk