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Book Review of "Teaching Reading to English Language Learners: Insights from Linguistics"

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Book Review

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Text:

Lems, K., Miller, L. D., & Soro, T. M. (2010). *Teaching reading to English language learners: Insights from linguistics*. New York: The Guilford Press.

As a linguist, specialist in second language reading, and teacher educator, I often find myself frustrated at the lack of teacher-training materials that integrate linguistics, reading theory, and practical teaching activities. Typically, one or two of these three elements are included, but not all of them. Kristin Lems, Leah D. Miller, and Tenena M. Soro felt that same frustration and thus, in order to alleviate it, wrote *Teaching Reading to English Learners: Insights from Linguistics*. This graduate-level volume can be utilized by P-12 ESL educators who wish to increase their familiarity with literacy instruction, P-12 reading specialists who want to understand the phenomenon of second language acquisition, and mainstream teachers who aim to help their ESL students better comprehend text. It contains nine chapters which cover first and second language reading acquisition theory, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing.

Among the impressive elements of the book is its user-friendly nature. According to Lems, Miller, and Soro (2010), linguistics-focused reading texts tend to be “overly technical” (p. viii), and therefore not accessible to non-specialists. In contrast, this one makes linguistics comprehensible in three ways. First, it contains an easy-to-use pronunciation guide which avoids many of the confusing symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet, but still provides the essence of the sounds necessary for understanding sections on spelling and morphemes.

Second, complicated linguistic jargon is neatly summarized in tables, pictures, and figures, thus making it more comprehensible for newcomers. In Chapter 2, “First-Language Influence in Second-Language Acquisition,” the terms Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) are made salient by a table that breaks down each element of both terms. In Chapter 4, “Learning to Read, Write, and Spell Words in English as a New Language,” the authors discuss different writing systems. In order to illustrate them, they display pictures of signs, shops, and posters that show the writing structures of several languages, some of which are logographic (e.g. Chinese), while others are alphabetic (e.g. Russian), and syllabic (e.g. Bengali). In Chapter 5, “Using Morphemes to Learn Vocabulary,” they present an inverted pyramid with each of the four types of morphemes, ranging from whole words (i.e. lexical, functional morphemes) to affixes (i.e. derivational bound morphemes, inflectional bound morphemes).

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The third reason why the text is user-friendly is due to its inclusion of a glossary which gives alternative explanations of the complicated linguistics terms (e.g. phoneme segmentation, shallow orthography, and semantics) covered in each chapter. Most terms are accompanied by examples which help illustrate them. When discussing the term *compounding*, for instance, they use common words (e.g. butterfly, toothbrush) that show how this process involves putting together two words to make a new one.

Another positive feature of this volume is its practicality for reading specialists, ESL instructors, and mainstream teachers. Several chapters demonstrate how various techniques and activities can be used with English language learners. In Chapter 7, "'The Same, but Different': Reading Fluency in English as a New Language," they discuss various ways of promoting fluency in English, such as segmenting text, choral reading, and echo reading. In Chapter 8, "Achieving Comprehension in L2 English Reading," the authors show how teachers can utilize many types of extensive reading activities, such as daily silent reading and book bags. Importantly, they explain that teachers must read themselves during Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) or other extensive reading activities in order to provide good examples of sound reading practices. In addition, they explain that teachers must serve as a bridge between families and public libraries. Finally, the authors explain the TESOL/WIDA proficiency levels and include them in concepts and activities in many chapters, thus giving teachers concrete examples of how to use them.

While there are some aspects of the text that will be useful for ESL, reading, and mainstream teachers, other facets of it will not be valuable for all three groups. For example: In Chapter 1, "Big Ideas and Research That Guide the Profession," the authors discuss the basics of second language acquisition, such as the affective filter, the output hypothesis, comprehensible input, and motivation. In addition, they describe basic ESL methods such as the grammar translation method, audiolingualism, and the communicative approach. Even though reading and mainstream teachers may be unfamiliar with this material, ESL teachers will already be well acquainted with it. The latter will also have had coursework in much of the content discussed in Chapter 2, such as Chomsky's theories of the innate nature of language, and negative and positive transfer from the first to the second language. Finally, Chapter 3, "ELL Oracy: Listening Comprehension and Oral Language Development," and Chapter 9, "Writing to Learn in English across the Curriculum," highlight the silent period and the differences between spoken and written languages (e.g. length of utterances/sentences, vocabulary usage, the presence of punctuation), respectively. This information will be nothing new for ESL teachers. Conversely, reading specialists and mainstream teachers will be familiar with many of the techniques for improving comprehension that are discussed in Chapter 8, such as pre-teaching vocabulary, word banks, semantic maps, and Venn diagrams.

Although some sections of the book may be more relevant for certain types of teachers than others, the vast majority of it precisely and clearly explains concepts that are frequently difficult to understand and even more difficult to articulate. An exception to this is in Chapter 9, in which the authors address the possible reasons behind students' written errors (e.g. negative transfer from the first language, unawareness of grammatical forms, an insufficient lexicon to express their thoughts). The problem is not their explanation of the origin of errors, but rather the absence of a distinction between *errors* and *mistakes*, as in the following example: "Writing

mistakes dog many a dedicated ELL writer, and the stubborn persistence of *errors* even after a *mistake* has been explained, demonstrated, or practiced in class can be exasperating both for the student and the teacher” (p. 205, emphasis mine). The differences between errors and mistakes were noted more than forty years ago by S. Pit Corder, who showed that errors are recurring misuses of form which reflect lack of second language competence, while mistakes are occasional incorrect applications of forms which the learner has already fundamentally acquired (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Teachers need to understand these terms, lest they waste instructional time and effort addressing one (i.e. mistakes) when they should be addressing the other (i.e. errors).

Another problem with Chapter 9 concerns their pedagogical recommendations regarding the correction of grammatical errors. In short, the authors advocate the *focus on form approach*, which, according to Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998), encourages teachers to correct their learners’ errors when there is some sort of communication problem. They note that teachers can focus on form by offering recasts, which involve reformulating the learner’s erroneous forms so that they are grammatical. Recasting can lead to uptake, which is when learners actually start applying the target form. While focus on form is one approach to dealing with errors, it is not the only one. Specifically, authors such as Krashen (1982) and Truscott (1996) have strongly argued that error correction of any kind is virtually worthless in terms of helping students achieve grammatical accuracy, and can be harmful due to its stressful and demoralizing effects on students. In future editions of the text, these divergent views on error correction should be discussed.

With the exception of the book’s less than sufficient treatment of error correction, it is a clearly written volume that contains useful information for reading specialists, ESL instructors, and mainstream teachers. As previously stated, the authors demystify the world of linguistics while still making it interesting and useful. In addition, the practicality of the text will be highly appreciated by working professionals and new teachers, alike. Thus, it is appropriate for the P-12 audience for whom they wrote it. However, due to its largely age-neutral activities, it can also be used by those who work with young adults in community colleges and pre-collegiate intensive English institutes.

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About the Author

Alex Poole is Associate Professor of English at Western Kentucky University. His interests include focus on form instruction, first and second language reading strategies, and Spanish-English bilingualism.