

ENGLISH L2 READING: GETTING TO THE BOTTOM (2ND ED.) BY B. BIRCH

Birch, B. (2007). *English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom (2nd Ed.)* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. List price: \$31.95.

Reviewed by Amy Frederick and Paul Kroshus

In *English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom*, Barbara Birch makes the case that a "truly whole" language view of second language reading includes bottom-up as well as top-down approaches. "...(G)ood readers," she says, "effectively use their high- and low-level knowledge and processing strategies to assign meaning to letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, and so on by making informed decisions at strategic points" (p.9). Yet some ESL students have not had the opportunity to develop low-level processing strategies and therefore may not be able to read English in the most efficient way. According to Birch, these skills have been essentially ignored in the fields of ESL and EFL in favor of a more "whole language" approach. Therefore, teachers' lack of expertise in teaching bottom-up reading may result in students not being instructed systematically in how to encode and decode English.

Birch explicates the subcomponents of bottom-up processing, such as writing systems, listening skills, and even the dreaded phonics, providing specific classroom-based applications for each. Birch includes many supports for the reader as she delves into complex linguistic concepts. Each chapter begins with *pre-reading questions* to think about and discuss, *study guide questions* to answer while reading, and *discussion questions* at the end. Birch also makes liberal use of diagrams and schematics to support the readers' understanding of the material.

Chapter 1 sets up two introductory topics as a basis for understanding the reading process. A reader, to Birch, is like a computer program that uses "symbolic processing strategies and a large number of facts and hundreds of rules stored in its knowledge base to make quick decisions about something that is perceived" (p. 9). To that effect, Birch provides what she calls the Expert Decision Maker Metaphor as a framework on which to arrange the linguistic information readers use. In chapter two, Birch methodically describes several types of writing systems and explains how they are similar and different from English. The most interesting aspect of this chapter is how different logographic writing systems (i.e., Korean and Chinese) are from English and that these differences can have a negative impact on L1 to L2 transfer for ESL students from these language backgrounds. This foundation and focus on written forms is frequently left out of the in-service and pre-service curriculum for ESL teachers.

Chapter nine questions the common ESL strategy of skipping words to get general meaning of text in order to avoid getting "stuck" on the words. Birch debunks this common practice saying that each word in a text is necessary for comprehension and skipping may only be beneficial for low-level text. By giving students explicit vocabulary strategies to use while reading, they will form the habit of using contextual knowledge, pictures, and vocabulary resources to work at breaking down meaning from text.

Birch's theories may lead one to believe that this book should be used as a curriculum guide; however, we would argue that it is more effectively used as a resource in combination with a strong, authentic literacy curriculum. Writing language objectives for lesson plans is a common practice that is often difficult for teachers. Birch helps teachers incorporate these bottom-up skills into curriculum that they have already developed.

The book targets a general ESL environment, but we believe that it speaks most urgently to the secondary and adult levels. The content classroom and curriculum have proven to be particularly difficult to ESL learners. Also, at the adult level, there are frequent examples of students who suffer from lack of print knowledge, and bottom-up strategies benefit learners with low print literacy and interrupted schooling. Birch's instructional strategies will be very helpful in breaking down difficult texts and making content teachers more aware of the specific needs that their second language learners bring to content-area reading.

This book could be overwhelming to an audience that lacks background knowledge in linguistics. It is recommended that readers have a working knowledge of basic linguistic terminology and concepts. Besides information overload, another concern is that Birch's main message could be misconstrued. She makes a case for "balanced" instruction, yet she doesn't consider any top-down approaches in this volume. A reader could easily pass over that essential message and walk away with the notion that the right way to teach L2 reading is to use *only* bottom-up approaches. The results could be a decontextualized, boring, and ineffective curriculum.

Though not an easy read, *English L2 Reading* is well worth the effort. It is an important contribution to the field and is recommended for all who are teaching English L2 reading and writing.

REVIEWERS

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