

Chapter 4

Reading Comprehension and Multilingual Students



Scientific Insights About Teaching Reading Comprehension to Multilingual Students

Abstract This chapter describes scientific insights about teaching reading comprehension specifically to multilingual students. The role of vocabulary and the first language is discussed. This chapter also includes didactic principles regarding teaching reading comprehension to second language learners: monitoring students' reading development, stimulating reading in both languages, developing students' second language lexical quality, teaching specific reading strategies, and using first language proficiency.

Keywords Reading comprehension · Multilingual students · Didactic principles · Practical guidelines

4.1 Introduction

More than half of the world's population speaks more than one language. Whether it be through migration, multiple language groups living in the same area, or a different reason, many people, including children, live multilingual lives. Distinctions can be made regarding degree of language exposure, the age of acquisition, and the order of acquisition. In this chapter, we take a broad view of multilingualism: multilingual students are those able to express themselves and function in multiple languages. They are students who live or study in a multilingual environment for a variety of reasons. Students may speak the national language at school and a dialect or minority language at home or they may have a migrant family background and therefore speak a different language at home. The region where the students live may have multiple official languages, such as in Catalonia (Spain), South Africa, Canada, Curaçao, and Hong Kong, to name a few. In these cases, their education is often multilingual as well. There are also schools that choose to offer bilingual education, usually the national language in combination with a major international language such as English, Spanish, French, or Mandarin. In these cases, students become multilingual through going to school. In addition, there are many schools that only offer education in the national language, and students who speak another language at home thus learn to read in a language other than their mother tongue. Finally, there are countries with

a bilingual post-colonial setting, where the language in school is the post-colonial language that is not spoken at home or in the community (e.g., in Jamaica or Curaçao).

Textbox 4.1: Examples of multilingualism in different situations

George lives in Malaysia with his father and mother, the Kenyan ambassador. At home they speak Swahili and English. He goes to an English international school. His friends teach him some Malay when they go out.

Violeta and Roberto live in Chile. Most of the time they speak Spanish with their friends, family, and at school. But when they visit their grandparents, they speak Aymara.

Hatice's parents immigrated to The Netherlands from Turkey before she was born. At school she speaks Dutch, but at home she speaks mostly Turkish. Hatice listens to music and watches movies in English with her friends.

The nature of a child's linguistic environment influences how and when they learn their languages. Children who grow up with multiple languages in the home environment learn the different languages simultaneously. Another scenario is when children are sequentially bilingual: first learning the home language and then learning the school language when going to school. Children who migrate at a later age may already be quite advanced in their mother tongue (and even know how to read and write), before they start to learn their new country's language.

The different reasons for and timing of becoming multilingual result in varying degrees of fluency, both for home and school languages. For the classroom, this means that teachers are faced with and need to be aware of students' language proficiency in the home language as well as the school language, and the effect this has on students' reading comprehension skills. In essence, teaching reading comprehension to multilingual students is no different from teaching monolingual students. However, there are a number of specific aspects and challenges that teachers encounter in the multilingual classroom. In this chapter, we first describe theories regarding reading comprehension and multilingualism, and the impact of the first language (L1) on comprehension in the second language (L2). We then turn to classroom practice, showing how theory can be put to use in the curriculum.

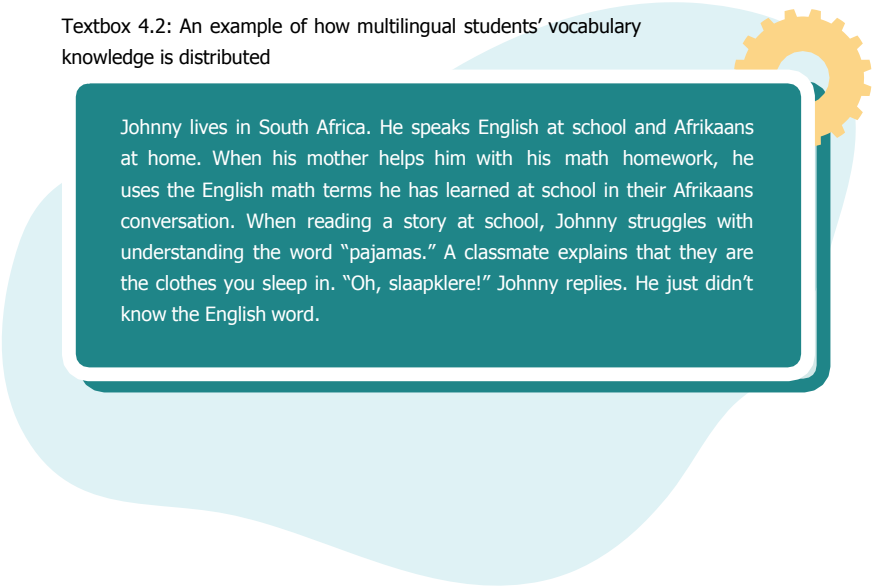
4.2 Theory on Reading Comprehension and Multilingualism

In Chapter 1 of this book, we described theoretical perspectives on reading comprehension. These also apply to reading comprehension among multilingual students (Verhoeven & Van Leeuwe, 2012). In general, L2 readers (those who are reading in a language that is not their mother tongue), often have lower performance in reading comprehension in the second language (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2014), and this gap tends to be larger in the upper primary grades compared to the lower primary grades. The developmental paths, however, are quite similar (Schaars et al., 2019), and so are the contributions of abilities that predict individual variation in reading comprehension.

Learning to read in a language other than the L1 does not seem to cause many problems in general. Decoding skills have often been found to be similar in L1 and L2 learners (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010). The main reason for lower scores in reading comprehension and slower development of reading comprehension in L2 learners is the lower level of L2 vocabulary (Lervåg & Aukrust, 2010). Words in a student's vocabulary are not single units, but part of a network of words with many connections and cross-links between them. The more connections between words, the deeper the understanding of the target word. L2 learners often have a less-developed network in their L2 due to a narrower vocabulary breadth (number of words) and a weaker depth (quality of understanding) (Proctor et al., 2012). In addition, multilingual students' vocabulary knowledge is often distributed over their languages, although their vocabulary size is generally similar to (or more extensive than) monolingual students, their vocabulary breadth and depth in one language may lag behind their peers. For example, they may mostly know words for activities around the home in their L1, while mainly knowing words for activities at school in their L2. This can be challenging when reading stories about home situations in the school language.

Proficiency in the first language may have a positive transfer on L2 comprehension (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2011). This claim is based on the theory of linguistic interdependence (Cummins, 1979, 2001) that suggests that development in the L1 can help the development in the L2. For learning to read, for example, phonological awareness is an important precursor and highly related in L1 and L2. When students already know how to read in one language, this can help them in learning to read in another language (August & Shanahan, 2006); they are familiar with the concept of letters having meaning and forming words, and with the process of reading. Depending on the language, they may already know all or most of the letters (presuming both languages are written using the same script). For vocabulary, while a student may not know the label for a word in the L2, they can already be familiar with the concept and know the label in the L1, having already established at least partial lexical understanding of that word.

Textbox 4.2: An example of how multilingual students' vocabulary knowledge is distributed



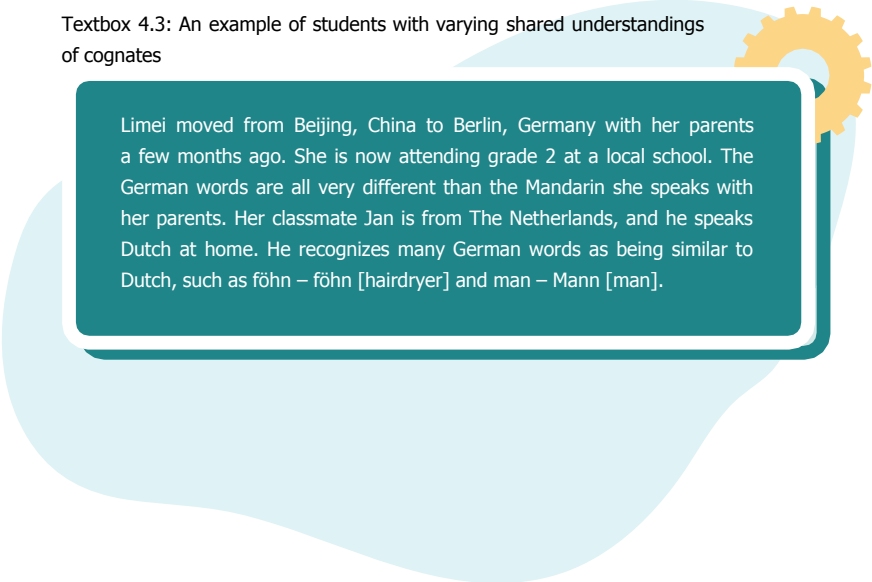
Johnny lives in South Africa. He speaks English at school and Afrikaans at home. When his mother helps him with his math homework, he uses the English math terms he has learned at school in their Afrikaans conversation. When reading a story at school, Johnny struggles with understanding the word "pajamas." A classmate explains that they are the clothes you sleep in. "Oh, slaapkler!" Johnny replies. He just didn't know the English word.

When the languages have more similarities, transfer will play a larger role, for example from German to Dutch is easier than from German to Chinese. Students may, for example, benefit from shared cognates: words in different languages that sound similar and have similar meaning.

Environmental factors also play an important role in explaining L2 reading comprehension. As in L1 comprehension, the home literacy environment is highly important. Children should read, be read to, and see others reading, either in their L1 or in their L2. Cultural differences may impact the reading motivation and attitudes of both parents and children regarding reading, which in turn can have an impact on reading comprehension. When there are cultural differences between the home and school environments, L2 learners may lack certain background knowledge that is needed for comprehension of school-based texts (Burgoyne et al., 2013; Droop & Verhoeven, 2003). The quality of the linguistic input in the home environment is also an important factor in the L2 reading comprehension development (Van den Bosch et al., 2020). For example, the conversations between parents and children about various subjects play a role, as well as the number of books at home, frequency of library visits, and playing rhyming games (Burgess, 2011). Exposure to books from an early age is an important factor in becoming literate (Davidse et al., 2011). Reading at home continues to be an important contributor to the development of reading comprehension (Mol & Bus, 2011). Stimulating reading is important to continue an upward spiral of causality (more reading, higher proficiency, higher motivation, etc.).

As noted above, current theories suggest that many different facets play a role in L2 reading comprehension. However, it is important to not simply categorize children as L1 versus L2 readers, as the variation within L2 readers is very high.

Textbox 4.3: An example of students with varying shared understandings of cognates



Limei moved from Beijing, China to Berlin, Germany with her parents a few months ago. She is now attending grade 2 at a local school. The German words are all very different than the Mandarin she speaks with her parents. Her classmate Jan is from The Netherlands, and he speaks Dutch at home. He recognizes many German words as being similar to Dutch, such as föhn – föhn [hairdryer] and man – Mann [man].

There are L2 readers with higher reading comprehension in their L2 than the reading comprehension of their L1 peers (Van den Bosch et al., 2019). In the end, the level of vocabulary is key to comprehension.

4.3 From Theory to Classroom Practices

Based on the scientific literature, we can formulate several classroom principles regarding reading comprehension in L2 learners. It is clear that the gateway to becoming a successful L2 reader is by gaining a large vocabulary, which is itself largely driven by reading. The reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and comprehension is clear and so, in classrooms, attention should be paid to both.

4.3.1 Monitoring the Abilities of the Children

The first principle is not a teaching principle, but one that relates to having insight into a child's capacities. A lower reading comprehension because of lower linguistic abilities in the L2 is not directly a reason for concern. It is a reason to pay attention to the development of the L2. It is crucial to monitor the development of reading comprehension over time. A lower score at one time point is far less of a concern when the child shows normal development over time. However, when development stagnates, this is a red flag. It is then relevant to find out whether the child also has problems in their L1, as this could point in the direction of a developmental language disorder (Genesee et al., 2004). Parents may be good informants of this latter aspect, starting from when a child enters the school—whether it be in grade 1 or a higher grade. It is, therefore, recommended that during an intake, the teacher receives information on the L1 language development of the child, and whether they like to read at home/are being read to. This can already give indications of what to expect regarding L2 development and what level of intervention might be needed.

4.3.2 Stimulating Reading, Both in L1 and L2

The best way to become proficient in a language is practice. So, the child should be encouraged to read books, watch movies and series, listen to songs, and engage in other activities in which they are confronted with the L2. However, because of linguistic transfer, reading in the L1 should certainly also be encouraged and supported. An important aspect here is motivation: being motivated to read and enjoying reading, play a significant role in advancing reading skills (Mol & Bus, 2011). Motivation comes from self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). If a child can make choices, and be in control of their own learning process, intrinsic motivation will be higher. For example, the purpose of improving the second language, practical benefits, and intrinsic values play a role: why would you want to learn the new language? Experiencing progress and success contribute to reading motivation (Toste et al., 2020). According to De Burgh-Hirabe (2013), reading motivation is influenced more by reading materials and a student's attitude towards reading in the second language than by low reading skills or the sociocultural environment. Furthermore, the first two components can compensate for the latter two components. Some students may experience anxiety towards reading in their L2: this is often linked to how difficult they think the language is to read (Saito et al., 1999). In these cases, teachers can help students by first looking for ways to reduce their anxiety. To stimulate motivation, teachers may engage in a contest, for example setting a reading goal for a number of pages to read for the coming week, or providing a fun activity or reward when students have finished a book.

4.3.3 Developing L2 Lexical Quality

As is clear from the literature, a lower level of vocabulary is associated with lower reading comprehension. To stimulate L2 vocabulary, it is crucial to do this in context, to address lexical quality. But the teaching and learning of vocabulary can often be experienced as a boring activity, both by children and by the teacher. Using mind maps in the form of playful game-like activities (Yip & Kwan, 2006) may be one solution. These mind maps can help show the relationships between words and concepts. For example, words can be connected based on the theme (e.g., the zoo), associations (e.g., linking to students' own experiences), how words sound, or hierarchy (e.g., different kinds of animals that fall in the same category such as baby animals) (Drager et al., 2010; Mirman et al., 2017). In promoting vocabulary development, it can be relevant to pay attention not only to the meaning of a word, but also to its form, for example, how a word is pronounced and how it is spelled (Janssen et al., 2019). Other ways to teach vocabulary include repeating words in different contexts, using cooperative games to practice using the new words, and, where relevant, drawing attention to derived words (e.g., stabilize, destabilize, stabilizers, stabilization, etc.). Using specific methods repeatedly creates familiar routines that help students in their learning process. In all, it is very relevant to teach word meanings to children. As was the case in the previous principle, self-determination is key.

4.3.4 Teaching Specific L2 Reading Strategies

Being able to derive the meaning of an unknown word from the context is an important word learning strategy (Fukkink & de Glopper, 1998), and even more so for those reading in their L2, as they will encounter more unknown words. The strategy is not a specific L2 reading strategy, but it is of particular importance for L2 readers, and hence should be prioritized. Teachers could also help children learn to use morphological information to deduce the meaning of an unknown word via affixes and suffixes (McCutchen & Logan, 2011). For example, words ending with -ist may refer to a person who knows a lot about a certain subject or holds certain beliefs. In their review study on effective methods for language stimulation, Vanbuel and Van den Branden (2020) also included second language learners. They write that it is important to integrate different strategies and approaches in the classroom, such as direct instruction, summarizing, and explicit attention to vocabulary. It is important that students know why and when strategies are useful, and to prompt students to use them both during and after reading.

4.3.5 Using the L1 Proficiency

In some countries, multilingual students receive instruction in their L1 by law, as this is seen as a cultural right. However, the L1 can also be seen as a means to support L2 instruction as noted by Fung et al. (2003), who evidenced the benefit of using L1-assisted reciprocal teaching. Children may also activate prior knowledge, which is relevant for comprehension, by reading in the L1. When asking students if they know words about a certain subject, the teacher can ask students if they also know words in a different language, which may lead to a broader scope of words, and to new vocabulary learning. When explaining, for example, the past tense, students may grasp the concept more easily when they realize they already know (of) the concept in their L1. This does not mean that teachers should constantly refer to or use students' L1, but the use of, and respect for, L1 proficiency, may be a powerful way to enhance L2 reading comprehension. As described in Sect. 4.3.1, it may be helpful to ask parents about their child's L1 proficiency and development: this may give ideas about how to connect their L1 and their L2. If the child's L1 is also taught at school, the child's L1 teacher may have useful insights.

4.4 In summary

- ✓ Monitor students' reading development, especially for multilingual students, and pay attention to how students' reading comprehension skills develop over time and which areas need extra attention.
- ✓ Stimulate reading by encouraging and supporting students to read in all available languages.
- ✓ Develop students' second language lexical quality by teaching vocabulary in meaningful ways.
- ✓ When teaching reading strategies, include specific strategies for second language learning.
- ✓ Use first language proficiency to activate prior knowledge.

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