“English L2 Reading”: Review and Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper reviews “English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom”, second edition, a book authored by Barbara Birch, and highlights the main issues presented throughout its chapters. It provides a critical analysis of the volume, focusing mainly on issues pertaining to ELLs’ linguistic knowledge, more specifically phonological and morphological awareness. The analysis includes a case study in which a cross-linguistic experiment is conducted in an ESL classroom to raise ELLs’ morphological awareness in word recognition. The paper concludes with an analysis pertaining to Arabic writing system issues raised by the author throughout the book.
Introduction

“English L2 Reading: Getting to the Bottom”, by Barbara M. Birch, is certainly a valuable resource for educators and researchers interested and involved in second language acquisition and learning. It is especially innovative in its balanced approach to reading between top-down (whole-language) and bottom-up (phonics or word recognition) processing. It also strikes a balance between theory and practice, providing, along with latest research-based methods and strategies in English L2 reading, practical guide for English as second language (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) teachers to follow as well as to understand the implications of the strategies discussed.

This paper attempts to analyze this volume from the point of view of an ESL teacher with bilingual (Arabic) education background. It is divided into two major sections: book review and critical analysis. While the book review highlights the main issues that the writer tackles throughout the ten chapters, the critical analysis provides, in addition to a broad critique of the book, focused analyses on three issues discussed throughout the book: (1) morphological awareness; (2) phonics instruction and phonemic awareness; and (3) Arabic writing system.

I. Book Review

In this second edition of English L2 Reading, Birch begins by identifying the changes, corrections, and additions that she implemented to refine this version and to make it “more reader-friendly.”

In the first chapter, "The Expert Decision Maker," the author examines the widely-held metaphoric notion of reading as the "psycholinguistic guessing game" and provides a counter-description of the domain as “an interactive top-down and bottom-up process.” Due to ELLs’ difficulty to “guess” the meaning of words based on their limited semantic and syntactic knowledge, she suggests a hypothetical model of the reading process, she calls it “an Expert Decision Making System”, which consists of two parts: Knowledge Base (top: world knowledge & bottom: language knowledge) and Processing Strategies (top: Cognitive & bottom: Language). While many researchers adhere to the top-down
flow of information, generally associated with whole language instruction, Birch adopts a more balanced approach in which the processing strategies work simultaneously in parallel, which emphasizes the interactive nature of reading. This model is expanded on throughout the book. She goes on describing the stages in English L1 reading development and English L2 reading development, highlighting the difficulties ELLs face in the process, such as their incomplete knowledge of English, L1 interference, and missing English processing strategies.

In Chapter 2, "Writing Systems," the author discusses the general development of writing and the three main types of writing in the world today. More specifically, she argues whether Chinese writing is purely logographic, Japanese writing is purely syllabic, and English writing is purely alphabetic. She defines and explains the difference between transparent and opaque writing systems and how English writing has become opaque, before tackling the issue of English spelling reform.

The author defines and describes the three types of writing systems: logographic (e.g., Chinese), syllabic (e.g., Japanese), and alphabetic (e.g., English). Alphabetic writing systems can be described as either transparent (letters correspond one-to-one to the sounds), such as Spanish, or opaque (letters and sounds do not correspond one-to-one), such as English. Through a brief history of English writing, the author provides three reasons for the opacity of English writing system: (1) outside influences and meddling (e.g., Norman French conquering of England, and tracing back the Latin origins of words); (2) borrowing foreign words; and (3) sound change or shift. In this last part, she presses her argument against spelling reform, citing the most conventional reasons for safeguarding the status quo (e.g., abundance of literature, preserving the roots of the words, etc.). She ends this chapter with an introduction into the main subject, English L2 reading, by briefly describing the possible L1 interference (positive and negative) on L2 literacy.

Chapter 3, "Low-Level Transfer of Reading Strategies," picks up on L1 interference, which effects word recognition strategies used by L2 learners. Some of the questions that the author attempts to answer are: What evidence is there that different writing systems require different knowledge and processing strategies? How similar do L1 and L2 need to be for the facilitation of strategies transfer to take place? Will
preference for different processing strategies transfer? And what are some implications for English L2 readers?

Two preliminary issues are posed and discussed throughout the chapter: Do the demands of reading different writing systems cause readers to develop different knowledge and different low-level reading strategies when they are learning to read in their native language? If so, do these strategies transfer from L1 to L2 or not? (p. 32) To answer these critical questions, Birch first introduces the psycholinguistic evidence for the existence of different knowledge and processing strategies for different writing systems. Birch cautions, "Each writing system provides the mind with different tasks to perform, so the mind responds by developing different strategies to work with the different input" (p. 33). She then attacks the question of transfer and the related issues of interference and facilitation. Based on the literature, it is suggested that some language-dependent features do not transfer from language to another and that generally there are some positive transfer from L1 reading processor to L2 when both languages are alphabetic systems. However, facilitation only occurs sometimes, and it may only offer a short-term benefit. To demonstrate the likelihood of language-specific processes and possible language transfer, the author then introduces four hypothetical students of different language backgrounds (Mexican Spanish, Greek, Egyptian Arabic, and Tai Chinese). Birch concludes, "No other writing system is like English; therefore positive transfer from L1 will be either limited or nonexistent, but negative transfer may be great."(p.45)

In Chapter 4, "Listening Skills in Reading," Birch stresses the importance of listening perception and discrimination. She begins by distinguishing between phonics, the popular teaching methodology, and phonemic-to-graphemic awareness, the ability to match up letters to some kind of sound representation (Wallace, 1992). She then discusses the development of phonemic processing and the innate ability of the children to discriminate the sounds and master the comprehension of the language spoken around them before they can produce all of the sounds. The four types of English reading are identified and explained: visual abstract reading, hearing the words, subvocalizing, and oral reading. This is followed by a presentation of the phonemic inventory and the anatomy of speech. The author defines phones, phonemes, and
allophones and argues in support of phonemic (not phonetic) English writing system. She presents the suprasegmental features of English (i.e., word-level stress, phrasal stress, and intonation) and how they are important to the nonnative speaker before identifying, discussing, and providing activities for phonemic awareness, one of the most discussed topic in recent English reading research. Some of the critical questions that the author encourages readers of this chapter to answer are: How and under what educational conditions can phonemic awareness be developed? And what kind of mental processing is used in trying to understand the speech of someone with a foreign accent?

In chapter 5, "Processing Letters," the author focuses entirely on the development of graphemic knowledge and processing strategies. Birch begins by identifying ‘graphemes’ and ‘graphs’ and explains why vowel grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences are less predictable. She defines ‘saccades’, ‘eye fixations’, and ‘regressions’ in her attempt to identify the knowledge that the orthographic processor draws on to recognize graphs. The differences in reading speed between beginning and expert readers are also discussed along with identifying ‘pattern recognition’ and the ‘word superiority effect’ and its causes. The author then discusses why it is easier to read a pseudo-word like *blash* than a nonword like *hsalb*. And finally, she identifies the implications that these issues impose on ESL reading instructions and the three methods of presenting grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences, analytical method, synthetic method, and linguistic method.

Chapter 6, "The English Spelling System," is a linguistic approach in which the author tries to dispel the myth that English spelling is chaotic and to explain why English writing is phonemic and not phonetic. She argues that the opacity of English writing system requires more graphemic awareness than do transparent systems. She defines ‘raw probabilities’ and ‘adjusted probabilities’ and then explains how readers use probabilistic reasoning in reading. In the process of this discussion, the author identifies the English consonants that have the most unpredictable pronunciations and explains what increases their predictability and also compares and contrasts reading and spelling. She argues that direct and explicit phonics instruction in the classroom, which emphasizes the visual recoding of the graph into a phoneme and involves accurate
listening discrimination activities, can indeed help learners to develop efficient grapheme-to-phoneme knowledge and processing strategies as well as the probabilistic reasoning that expert English readers employ.

In Chapter 7, "Approaches to Phonics," Birch carries on with her linguistically oriented approach by first identifying phonics and phonics methodologies and generalizations. She attempts to explain the reason behind the bad reputation that phonics instruction has had due to the methods in which it was implemented in the past and rendered it, for many learners as well as practitioners, useless, pointless, time-wasting, and boring. The author identifies and discusses the synthetic method, linguistic method, and "smart" phonics. She then identifies reasoning by analogy and the knowledge necessary for utilizing this strategy. The rest of the chapter focuses on Ehri’s stages of development of reading strategies for English L1 acquisition, how do the strategies ESL and EFL learners develop for their L1 reading relate to Ehri’s stages, what is the structure of the syllable for English, and how can reading instruction for vowels be taught most efficiently.

Chapter 8, "English Morphophonemic Writing," is a fully linguistic review in which Birch, in addition to promoting phonemic awareness, she highlights the value of morphological awareness. She begins by identifying the basic units in language: words and morphemes and the different types of morphemes (free, bound, derivational and inflectional). She then discusses pronunciation and spelling changes caused by derivation followed by a theoretical argument regarding the storage of morphological knowledge in memory. The author then defines the four morphological types of languages, based on Comrie’s continuum of morphological variation in the world’s languages (Isolating, fusional, agglutinating, and polysynthetic). And though she admits, “languages, the ultimate human creations, resist neat and tidy classification,” the author seems to adopt and contradict Comrie’s classification method at the same time, by providing evidence to prove that English is morphologically isolating, fusional, agglutinating and polysynthetic at once! She discusses whether a language’s predominate morphology type affects the structure of the mental lexicon of the learner due to L1/L2 transfer problems. The two main questions that Birch attempts to answer throughout this chapter are: Is there any evidence that readers of different L1s develop
different low-level morphological processing strategies because of differences in the morphological structure of their words or mental lexicon? And could morphological processing in English be problematic for the ESL and EFL learner?

The aim of Chapter 9, "Vocabulary Acquisition," is to answer some of the questions that teachers as well as learners face, such as how do we understand words that we’ve never seen before in print, what makes a reader a good word learner, what properties of words make them easier to learn, and what does the research tell us about gaps in ESL and EFL learners’ vocabulary knowledge. The chapter begins with a discussion of top-down vocabulary acquisition strategies, such as comprehension strategies, word-learning strategies, and the most popular and controversial strategy called ‘skipping unknown words’. The author provides an interesting and comprehensive argument against the promotion of this latter strategy due to its negative implications on the learners on the long run. Learner-specific variables in vocabulary acquisition are then identified and explained (memory and ability to repeat, the phonological loop, and active word processors). This is followed by identifying lexical variables in vocabulary acquisition: Word appearance (acoustic similarity, word length, pronounceability, and orthography); Word classes and collocations (opaque parts of speech, probabilistic reasoning, and collocations); Word formation (borrowing, compounding, acronyms and abbreviations, back-formation and clipping, conversion and other processes); and Word meaning (metaphor, reasoning and analogy, polysemy, homonymy). Birch stresses the significance of the word meaning as the lexical ambiguity created by homophones (e.g., eight-ate), homographs (e.g., close-close), and homonyms (e.g., bear-bear) more often presents ESL and EFL students with stressful decision-making dilemmas. Upon making a strong case against skipping unknown words, the author then presents two bottom-up word learning strategies: repetition and keyword strategy. Finally, she provides a discussion on the implications of the discussed strategies on ESL and EFL readers.

In chapter 10, "Getting to the Bottom of English L2 Reading Fluency," Birch culminates the discussion of second language reading by exploring the acquisition of reading fluency in light of the complexity of the reading process. The author initiates the discussion, as usual, by a set of preliminary questions concerning the extent by which we can expect to be able to change, through instruction, the L1 patterns of activation
that are hard-wired into the brain and whether native-like brain activation is necessary for effective or fluent reading in L2. She then attends to these questions by first summarizing what we have learned throughout the previous chapters:

For L1 brain activation patterns to change, L2 readers may require direct instruction in English letter-to-sound conversion (phonics), onsets and rimes, and ample practice with easy readings and steadily increasing vocabulary to build up their facility with English reading strategies. To change the L1 knowledge and strategies, we must expect a lengthy acquisition period; we must allow learners to acquire automaticity in reading English before requiring the comprehension of difficult texts. (p.168)

The author then discusses the effects of instruction on brain activation, whether learners in fact make a transition from L1 reading to L2, and whether there is any evidence that instruction does indeed change brain activation. Another query the author makes is whether different instructional methods result in different activation patterns, rates of acquisition, and improved reading scores, or the patterns and improvement be independent of instructional method. The most powerful argument that Birch makes in this volume is the need for a more balanced approach to learners' reading fluency via (a) increasing the readers' knowledge of English (i.e., functions words and punctuation), (b) improving their automatic use of reading strategies (i.e., counterproductive and instructional), and (c) providing reading tasks (i.e., reading rate, phrasing, and modeling) aimed at improving specific aspects of fluency (p.p.174-177).

This chapter induces the reader to use the acquired knowledge to query and discover how oral reading is similar to and different from silent reading, what makes fluent oral reading difficult for the ESL or EFL reader, should fluency tests be avoided, and what changes might be necessary in reading curricula. The chapter also helps us understand the extent by which reading instruction can change brain activation in dyslexic children and, given that there are age-related factors in language acquisition and learning, whether the activation change and improvement in reading found in the dyslexic children is indeed related to their younger age.
Birch’s final words in this chapter reiterate the goal of this book—persuading and encouraging ESL and EFL reading teachers to focus their efforts on adopting strategies which directly and positively affect the learners’ oral reading fluency, which contributes to silent automaticity and, eventually, to more proficient reading in L2.

The book also includes two appendices and a workbook supplement.

Appendix A, “English Graphemes,” is an updated summary of Venezky’s The Structure of English. It covers the consonant grapheme to phoneme correspondences, the vowel grapheme to phoneme correspondences, the use of graphemes as markers, and common graphemic alterations.

Appendix B, “English Phonemes and their Principal Spellings,” is largely adapted from Groff and Seymour’s Word Recognition: The Why and How. It includes three charts: (1) English consonant phonemes and their principal spellings, (2) Simple English vowel phonemes and their principal spellings, and (3) English diphthongs and their principal spellings.

The workbook supplement includes twelve exercises that cover a wide array of the materials presented throughout the volume.

II. Critical Analysis

1. Morphological Awareness

Can and do English learners use knowledge of English morphology and morphological processing strategies to decode English texts?

It is not surprising to say that word recognition via processing derivational English morphology is a challenging task, even to native speakers. It involves the ability to (1) disassemble the word into component morphemes (e.g., un/use/ful), (2) match those components with phonological, lexical, and semantic representations in the memory, and (3) reassemble them back while attempting to construct a combinational meaning that may or may not represent the sum of all pieces (e.g., under/stand/able). At any of
these steps, assuming first that the word is indeed segmentable, the reader may find the process too cumbersome and the results even more ambiguous and less recognizable!

However, extensive research shows that morphological awareness is significantly critical to the success of English readers who process morphology based on the level of morphological awareness they have achieved through direct and explicit instruction. Birch recognizes that the greater the reader’s knowledge about prefixes, roots, and suffixes, the greater is his or her ability to see structure when looking at words. Fowler & Liberman (1995) confirm that knowledge of derivationally suffixed English words facilitates accurate reading in the school years. Derwing, Smith, & Weibe (1995) acknowledge that the ability to see the derivational morphemes in English word is dependent on the knowledge that a reader has about the language, which is acquired mainly through schooling. In addition, Levin, Ravid, and Rapaport (1999) and Byrant, Nunes, and Bindman (1999) propose that morphological awareness plays a causal role in the learning of morphological spelling patterns.

Furthermore, Lawrence (2008) suggests that, given that written English is morphophonemic, it makes sense that learning new vocabulary in a written context may require the ability to sound out the phonemes of a word (phonology) as well as detect small indicators of meaning (morphology). Anglin (1993) conducted a study that examined children’s vocabulary knowledge in relation to morphological knowledge. Results from the study indicate that comprehension of derived words improved dramatically from 1st to 5th grade and made a significant contribution to overall vocabulary knowledge in 5th grade participants. In addition, it was found that multi-morphemic words also made a significant contribution to vocabulary knowledge of 5th grade students, in contrast to younger participants.

However, linguistically diverse ELLs differ in what they know about morphology and, thus, in their ability to process English text. Age, L1 writing system and length of studying English are major factors in the diverse linguistic capabilities of these students and the speed at which they are able to acquire morphological awareness.

The development of morphological awareness begins as early as preschool (3-5 years). In 1958, psycholinguist Jean Berko Gleason embarked on the task of measuring
children’s knowledge of and ability to manipulate morphological rules using a sentence completion task involving nonsense words (i.e., the wug test). She found that children, as young as four years of age, were successfully able to add simple plural inflections onto pseudowords. Carlisle (2003) suggested that more complex components of morphological awareness, such as the manipulation of complex derivations, begin developing in early grade school and continue developing well into adulthood.

Carlisle & Nomanbhoy (1993) theorized that during the early stages of reading development, when children are learning to decode or read single words, morphological awareness accounts for a small but significant portion of the variance in reading ability beyond that of phonological awareness. However, once readers have mastered the ability to decode and begin focusing on more advanced reading skills, such as learning vocabulary from text and text comprehension, morphological awareness may become increasingly important to literacy achievement. Furthermore, investigating a slightly older population of students, Carlisle (2000) examined the contribution of morphological awareness to word reading and reading comprehension in children with typical development enrolled in 3rd and 5th grade. Results indicated that morphological awareness was significantly related to the ability to read derived words and define morphologically-complex words in 3rd grade and 5th grade. Results also indicated that morphological awareness accounted for 43% of the variance in reading comprehension at the 5th grade level.

As evidenced by the vast linguistic and educational literature, morphological awareness clearly plays a significant role in language acquisition of native speakers of English, especially as they progress in school grades. While phonological awareness played a significant role at the preschool and first grade level, morphological awareness became more important at higher grades as the learners attempt to process more morphologically complex texts.

Although the research on the effective use of morphological processing strategy by ELLs is still very limited, knowledge of inflectional and derivational morphemes and the phonological changes that may occur in derivation can be very helpful to the English learner in terms of word recognition and accurate pronunciation.
However, despite the widely observed evidence that ELLs are negatively affected by the lack or inefficient knowledge of English inflectional and derivational morphology as well as the interference of transferred linguistic skills from their native languages, the quantity and quality of the research is not as comprehensive in terms of the significance of morphological awareness for ELLs' linguistic proficiency.

The literature concerning the morphological differences among languages and their implications for ELL students in processing English morphology is very limited. Birch suggests that, at present, it is unclear whether there is separate storage for L1 and L2, or whether there is one mental lexicon that serves more than one language or there might be two interconnected lexicons for L1 and L2. (p. 136). Due to this lack of knowledge, Birch asks “if ESL/ESL learners have a mental lexicon organized in a certain way for their L1s, do they use the same organizational principles and structure in acquiring an English mental lexicon or do the demands of learning English words necessarily create a mental lexicon appropriate for English? Alas, we do not know the answer to that”! (p.137)

Comrie (1981) devised a continuum of morphological variation in the world’s languages. He introduced the concept of two morphological dimensions, the first concerns the number of morphemes per word, and the second concerns the segmentability of words. At the four extremes of the continuum, languages were either isolating (e.g., Chinese), fusional (e.g., Spanish), polysynthetic (e.g., Tuscarora), or agglutinating (e.g., Turkish).

Birch suggests that if the L1 writing system doesn’t encode morphological changes in words, readers may not have efficient processing strategies like separation and recombination for morphological changes in English words, such as tense, possessive, or plural. They may be relying on simple matching strategy, which is not effective unless they have a perfect match for each word in their mental lexicon. (p.139)

Even though Chinese, like English, has root words, bound roots, inflectional and derivational affixes, however, Xing (2006) stresses that fundamental differences do exist between the two languages: (1) morphemes in Chinese are written in logographs rather than alphabets; (2) morphemes in Chinese are arranged non-linearly to form a word
rather than linear arrangements; (3) morphemes are basic units in Chinese rather than phonemes; and (4) morphemes in Chinese are character blocks based on which new words are formed rather than changing phonological or orthographic form to create new words.

Furthermore, gender marking in many languages (e.g., French, Spanish, Arabic, etc.) is used to determine reference between pronoun and noun phrase. In French and Spanish, all nouns are either masculine or feminine, and adjectives, determiners, and pronouns must match them. French and Spanish speakers will not be able to rely on their L1 strategy to process nouns and they may lack the strategies that English speakers develop. In addition, Birch expresses that while students who speak Hebrew or Arabic may have L1 processing strategies that focus more on infix morphological changes rather than on the prefixed and suffixed morphology of English, Japanese students use a system of particles (not inflections, but separate words) to indicate the functions that nouns have in sentences (subject, object, indirect object, etc.), and students from Latin- or Greek-based languages have the benefit of shared derivational morphology with English (e.g., pre-, post-, -ment, -tion, etc.) and they may focus more exclusively on Germanic morphology (e.g., -ness, -dom, -ly, etc.). (p.139-140)

2. Phonics Instruction & Phonemic Awareness

No English instructional approach is more controversial than phonics. Birch calls it “the ‘f-word’ in reading instruction because it has such a bad connotation for many reading practitioners” (p.105). This bad reputation dates back to the 1960’s and 1970’s when phonics instruction was seen as teacher initiated and centered, relentlessly repetitive, dull, and boring, memory-based, largely unrelated to meaningful content, based around meaningless pseudowords or silly stories, and mostly associated with worksheets. Most of these phonics methodologies, bundled under ‘synthetic method’, were developed “before there was much information about how people actually process letters and words in reading” (p.105).

Even its proponents do not generally agree on how intensive systematic phonics instruction should be employed in the classroom, for how long, at which grade levels,
how standardized and consistent such instruction should be, and how best to prepare teachers to succeed in utilizing this approach.

However, hundreds of studies have identified phonemic awareness as an essential factor in children’s, as well as basic language proficient ELLs’, ability to read during the first two years of instruction. The National Reading Panel (2000) identified 1,962 citations and, following a thorough meta-analysis of the vast literature, found that “teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words was highly effective under a variety of teaching conditions with a variety of learners across a range of grade and age levels and that teaching phonemic awareness to children significantly improves their reading more than instruction that lacks any attention to PA.” In addition, the report also indicated, “systematic phonics instruction enhances children’s success in learning to read and that systematic phonics instruction is significantly more effective than instruction that teaches little or no phonics.”

In her attempt to emphasize the significance of phonics instruction in the classroom and developing phonemic awareness of English learners, Birch hails “Smart” Phonics for its success in “teaching the grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences and sounding out strategies in a way that leads to acquisition rather than learning” (p.107). The author recognizes this success as a cornerstone for her balanced approach between word recognition and whole language. She argues that “phonics can be taught in an efficient way if we understand how readers read, and it can be embedded as one element within a whole language reading program” (p.107).

**Case Study**

As a high school ESL teacher, I work with 31 ELL students with diverse linguistic backgrounds: Albanian, Arabic (Iraqi dialect), Bosnian, Chinese, French (Cameroon and Gabon), Gujarati, Hindi, Polish, Punjabi, Spanish, Tagalog, Urdu, and Vernacular Liberian English. The students’ grades range from 9th through 12th. The vast range of academic and English language proficiency differences and the wide inventory of native languages within such a small group of students pose particular challenges to any English teacher. Among those challenges is the difficulty to synchronize the modification
of textbooks and other learning materials to the variable linguistic gaps (in reading, writing, speaking, and listening) the students have, according to their latest standardized assessments (based on Michigan English Language Proficiency Standards).

In an attempt to raise those ELLs’ phonological and morphological awareness, a daily examination of cross-linguistic differences had been conducted recently in the classroom. Students were asked to say (or write if possible) the translation of simple nouns and their corresponding plurals in their native languages (e.g., mother, head, chair, sun, child, etc.) Students then were instructed to identify the inflectional suffixes, prefixes, or markers for plural in their L1 and to provide a short list of their own vocabulary showing these inflections. Finally, students were asked to explain to the classroom, in English, these plural inflections in their languages.

The students were surprised by the results of this simple experiment, suggesting that none of them seem to have had any formal morphological processing instructions in their native languages. Hence, the students discovered the similarities as well as the differences between English and their L1 in terms of this particular grammatical function. Furthermore, they learned that while English plural inflections are always suffixes, Tagalog inflections were prefixes, Arabic inflections were both infixes and suffixes, and Chinese inflections were totally separate particles (morphemes) added before the nouns. This simple cross-linguistic experiment has shown indeed significant degrees of morphological awareness in word recognition and, consequently, the students became more motivated to conduct their own linguistic experiments!

During the last few weeks, similar experiments were conducted in the classroom, involving both inflectional and derivational morphemes. The results are just as promising and the students are now fully aware of the segmental nature of words (though they still sometimes overdo it!), which helped them become more successful in analyzing the words into morphemes and correctly predicting their spellings as well as their pronunciations. A formal and fully documented study is warranted to prove the significance of direct instruction in raising the morphological awareness of ELLs.

3. Arabic Language Issues in "English L2 Reading"
The author’s knowledge and analytical views of Arabic language and its writing system seem very limited, shortsighted, and at some points flatly wrong. The following analysis discusses three issues found in the book: (I) The complexity of the Arabic writing system and its impact on literacy; (II) The relationship between symbol and sound in alphabetic writing systems is “arbitrary and conventional”; (III) Arabic is “consonantal”.

I. In the third chapter, Birch attempts to analyze the effects of the differences in writing systems between Arabic and English on the processing strategies of an Arabic-speaking student from Egypt. She suggests that in addition to different symbols, the student has to cope with different direction of reading and writing (left-to-right). Furthermore, the author argues that another major challenge is that “standard Arabic writing is very different from spoken Arabic dialects. In fact, some consider written Arabic and spoken Arabic to be different dialects entirely and as a result, it is very difficult to learn to read and write.” The author then concludes, “There is a lot of illiteracy in the Arab world, and this is considered one reason why” (p. 43)

First, the author is fully aware that Arabic writing system is not unique in any of these characteristics. Hebrew, Persian, Urdu, and Punjabi are but a few examples of languages whose writing systems use right-to-left scripting, just like Arabic. In addition, whereas Chinese, Japanese, and Korean - all non-alphabetic writing systems, are generally written left-to-right or top-to-bottom with the vertical columns arranged from right to left, they are occasionally written right-to-left as well! Furthermore, Chinese publications sometimes intermingle all of these writing directions on the same page!

Second, although Arabic is the official language spoken in all Arab countries (a.k.a. the Arab world), though, in some, it is not even the first spoken language (e.g., Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Comoro Islands, Djibouti, etc.), the differences in the education systems amongst these countries are as wide as those existed among other nations of the world. Illiteracy rate, for example, ranges from less than 7% in Kuwait to about 49% in Mauritania!

As per the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report 2007/2008, the literacy rate in Kuwait was 93.3%, Qatar 89.0%, UAE 88.7%,
Lebanon 88.3%, and Saudi Arabia 82.9%. Arabic is the official language in all five countries and literacy rate is based on reading and writing in Arabic. On the other hand, the same report shows that the literacy rate in Bolivia was 86.7%, El Salvador 80.6%, Honduras 80%, Nicaragua 76.7%, and Guatemala 69.1%. Spanish is the official language of these Central and South American countries and literacy rate is based on reading and writing in Spanish. Using the same causality that the author used, no researcher is found to suggest that Spanish writing system, largely considered by many as one of the easiest alphabetic languages to learn, must be harder than Arabic and/or at least it is one of the reasons of the relative high illiteracy rate in these Spanish-speaking countries compared to their Arabic-speaking counterparts! Furthermore, whereas Chinese is considered by most as one of the hardest writing system to learn, China’s literacy rate stands at 90%.

Therefore, the suggestion that there is a positive relationship between the complexity, or the simplicity, of a writing system and illiteracy rate is thus baseless. Statistics show that literacy is mainly positively correlated with (a) the wealth of the nation and (b) the development of its education system.

II. In chapter 2 (p. 22) Birch argues that in alphabetic writing system, the relationship between the symbol and the sound is arbitrary and conventional. Arabic alphabet, however, is not as arbitrary as the Romanic based writing systems. The letter (سـ) called “seen” and pronounced /s/, is synonymous to the word “tooth”. Pictorially also the letter looks like a set of teeth. In addition, many Arabic words for tools and equipment that has sharp edges or teeth begin or end with the letter (سـ), such as, knife (سكين), sword (سيف), arrow (سيم), weapon (سلاح), spearhead (سنان), ax (فأس), and the verb sharpen (سنّ). Letter (ل) called “lām” and is pronounced /l/. It is the first letter in the Arabic words for ‘tongue’ and ‘language’. The word ‘tongue’ in Arabic, just as it is in English, also means ‘language’. Pictorially also the letter looks like a tongue. Interestingly enough, Roman letter <L> is relatively shaped as the mirror image of the Arabic <ل>, indicating that even English writing is not as arbitrary as the author suggests.
III. In chapter 3, Birch provides a case study in which Mohammed, a hypothetical Arab student from Egypt is learning English. She describes Arabic as an alphabetic writing system, “but it uses different symbols. It is also consonantal. So Mohammed must learn the same things that Despina must learn, but he must also learn to look at vowels and process them efficiently” (p. 43)

Whereas Arabic writing system is based on consonantal root, the widespread notion that the system is merely consonantal, that it does not have any vowels, and that vocalization is done arbitrarily through the use of diacritics (symbols placed above or below the letter) is utterly incorrect. Arabic writing system does have three short and three long vowels (/a/, /i/, /u/ and /ā/, /ī/, /ū/).

Furthermore, Arabic words always start with a consonant followed by either a short or long vowel. Long vowels are rarely followed by more than a single consonant. In contrast to Slavic writing systems and very similar to Romanic writing systems (Including English) clusters containing more than two consonants in a row do not occur in the Arabic writing system.

The following is an illustration of the Arabic consonantal root system from the Encyclopedia Britannica shows how words are derived via the use of vowels:

*The root /k-t-b/ combined with the pattern /-i-ā-/ gives kitāb ‘book,’ whereas the same root combined with the pattern /-ā-i-/ gives kātib ‘one who writes’ or ‘clerk.’ The language also makes use of prefixes and suffixes, which act as subject markers, pronouns, prepositions, and the definite article.*

Finally, the suggestion that Arabic students had no prior knowledge of the concept of vowels in their alphabet and that they need to learn how to at vowels and process them while attempting to decode English reading is simply baseless.

**Conclusion**

English L2 Reading is certainly a valuable book and it must become an essential reading in English and English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching education. Its balanced approach toward both word recognition and whole language is highly
commendable and tends to close an ever-widening gap between the fiercely trenched proponents of the two approaches.

While phonics and syntax constitute the bulk of English instruction in ESL environment, topics related to English morphology and morphological awareness are rarely ever approached by practitioners.

ESL students, for whom lack of vocabulary remains one of the major obstacles, should be equipped to utilize every word analysis strategy, including the ability to look at the morphological cues within the word in search for its meaning or part of speech. The students may very well benefit from direct instruction to learn how English words are formed.

Birch (pp.139-140) recommends that as ESL and EFL students are learning words in English, they should be building up such a storage of morphemes, rimes, and syllables through direct instruction and through extensive reading practice. ESL teachers should continuously instruct and remind their students that English writing is not just phonemic but also morphemic in that the accurate representation of sound is sacrificed to maintain the semantic connection between words that can be perceived if the root morphemes are spelled consistently (e.g., silent <b> in the root morpheme ‘debt’). She concludes that the point of morphological instruction and practice with processing strategies must be to reduce the cognitive load associated with the task, so students must understand the system, practice the strategy overtly, and generalize the strategy to all of their reading.
References


National Reading Panel (2000). Teaching Children to Read. Washington, DC.


