

Global Community – A Plain Language Summary by Ryan Tannenbaum

Letters learned – How a students' L1 writing system influences their English reading strategies

A plain language summary of *Alphabetic and nonalphabetic L1 effects in English word identification: A comparison of Korean and Chinese English L2 learners*

What you need to know:

Chinese readers need to learn many characters to read. As a result, they are very aware of the structure of written language. When Chinese English L2 learners read English, they pay more attention to the structure of written words than to the sounds that the letters make. On the other hand, Korean English L2 learners rely more on the sound that English words make compared to how the words are written.

What is the research about?

According to reading research, there are two different ways that we read. We either look at words and immediately know the meaning – this is called the addressed route – or we see the letters, sound out the word, and then know the meaning – this is called the assembled route.

The researchers wanted to see if English L2 learners coming from an alphabetic background relied more on the sound of the word (phonology), than learners who came from a non-alphabetic background like Chinese.

The researchers designed experiments to see what learners relied on when reading and processing different English words. They looked at which learners relied more on sound, and which relied more on how the word was written.

What did the researchers do?

Two groups of University students were selected for the experiment, 20 native Chinese speakers and 21 native Korean speakers. These groups were chosen, because Korean uses an alphabet while Chinese does not.

The groups were then given two different tasks, for the first task, subjects had to say whether a word belonged in a category. They then showed subjects a word, as well as similarly spelled words and homophones (words that sound the same). For example, if subjects were asked to identify flowers, they might be shown “rose”, “rows”, and “robs.”

They also asked subjects to complete a phoneme deletion task. This means that they were given a word, and a sound, they were then asked to take that sound out of the word, and write the new word. The researchers then looked at whether they were able to sound out the new word, and spell it properly or not. For example, subjects would be shown the word “might” and asked to remove the /t/ sound, making *my*. By looking at if subjects were able to sound out the right word, and if they were able to spell it correctly, researchers hoped to understand what strategies subjects were using to read, write, and understand English.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that Chinese English L2 learners relied more on how the words were written, than Korean students, who relied more on the sound of the words.

On the other hand, Chinese subjects paid more attention to the structure of the words (their orthography). As a result, Chinese subjects were far more confused by words that were spelled similarly, than Korean subjects.

The researchers suggest that because Chinese reading does not require readers to sound out words, Chinese L1 learners rely more heavily on how words are written than on the sound that the words make.

As a result, Chinese subjects were more likely to misidentify a word if it was a similarly spelled homophone, than if it was less similarly spelled.

Secondly, the Korean group was significantly better at the phoneme deletion task. They were able to remove a sound from a word and identify the new word with much greater accuracy.

Researchers found that English L2 learners coming from an alphabetic background use the sound of the words more to understand the meaning.

The researchers do suggest that regardless of one's native language, as learners become better at English, they start to use "native" strategies, like using phonology to sound out words.

How can you use this research?

Chinese ELLs have less experience sounding out words and finding the meaning. As a result, explicit instruction on sounding out words, can help to develop and expand students' toolbox of reading strategies.

Because Chinese ELLs are more attuned to the structure of words, and how they are written, focusing specifically on different components of words – especially morphology (how words can be changed to change meaning), could be an effective strategy with Chinese ELLs.

About the researchers:

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Reference:

Wang, M., Koda, K., & Perfetti, C. A. (2003). Alphabetic and nonalphabetic L1 effects in English word identification: A comparison of Korean and Chinese English L2 learners. *Cognition*, 87(2), 129-149.