An Analysis of Influencing Factors on Bilingual Reading of Second Language Learners

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Abstract: Proficiency in second-language (L2) reading is an important skill essential in an increasingly globalized world. Previous research has often addressed disparate elements influencing L2 reading proficiency without aggregating them into a comprehensive framework. This paper seeks to fill this gap by systematically collecting and examining the various factors that impact the ability to read in a second language. The primary objective of this research is to compile an exhaustive list of factors affecting L2 reading and to analyze their respective influences. By categorizing these factors into external and internal dimensions, this study aims to provide a holistic view of the ecosystem within which L2 reading comprehension develops and operates. Employing a qualitative literature review methodology, this research meticulously synthesizes existing studies and theoretical perspectives on L2 reading. The factors influencing L2 reading proficiency are divided into two broad categories: external and internal. External factors encompass educational contexts, socioeconomic influences, the role of technological tools and digital literacy, as well as cultural and contextual elements, and the characteristics of reading materials. Internal factors are identified as cognitive processes, the effects of language transfer and interference, and the roles of motivation and attitude in L2 reading. Each factor is analyzed for its unique contribution and interplay with other elements within the L2 reading process.

Keywords: Biliteracy, Bilingual Reading, Factors, Second Language Learning, Culture

1.   Introduction

With the advent of global communication and the increased movement of individuals across borders, the ability to read in a second language (L2) has become an indispensable skill.

Previous studies have revealed certain factors that affect L2 reading. Language proficiency, language complexity, educational setting, and reading strategy can all contribute to L2 reading competence [1]. Cultural relevance and background knowledge count also as important factors [2][2], since readers have higher levels of comprehension when texts are culturally relevant, and consequences of events can align with readers' prediction. Numerous scholars have given their own ideas regarding the factors that may influence on L2 reading performance from various perspectives. Goodman suggests that varied literacy experiences and the role of educators in facilitating and supporting literacy development cannot be underestimated [3]. The age of first bilingual language exposure and socioeconomic status, according to Kovelman and Petitto, are closely related to L2 reading [4]. Cultural and cognitive resources available within a household and the social networks to

exchange resources are of equal importance [5]. The reading materials selected for readers need to be taken into account for the accessibility in terms of content, language, culture, and vision [6]. The lexical quality hypothesis suggests that variations in lexical knowledge contribute to variations in comprehension performance and correlate with overall reading comprehension skill [7]. This suggests that cognitive factors such as word identification speed, lexical knowledge, and familiarity with words influence reading comprehension. McManus proposes that the first language (L1) can have both positive and negative effects on L2 acquisition. When the patterns of language use are similar across languages, L2 learning can be facilitated. L2 learning can be more difficult when L1 and L2 express the same meanings or concepts differently [8]. Technology can also be utilized in various fields of L2 learning, like grammar, speaking, and writing [9]. Also, learners' motivation is directly associated with the achievements [10].

This study categorizes these factors into external and internal domains and examines their effects on L2 reading through a literature research method. Through the systematic discussion of various factors affecting second language reading, this paper aims to enrich the theoretical research in this field and form a deeper understanding of second language reading, so as to better guide the practice of second language reading teaching and promote the development of English second language students' second language reading ability.

2. Internal Influencing Factors of Bilingual Reading

Internal factors play a crucial role in shaping an individual's proficiency in second-language reading. These factors are inherent to the learner and include cognitive factors, language interference, and learner motivation.

2.1. Cognitive Factors

Cognitive factors refer to the mental processes that underlie reading comprehension and include aspects such as working memory, phonological processing, and metacognitive strategies. Working memory is critical as it allows individuals to hold and manipulate information over short periods, which is necessary for understanding sentences and relating parts of the text to each other. Phonological processing aids in recognizing and decoding words, which is particularly challenging in a second language with different phonetic and phonological systems. Metacognitive strategies involve self-regulation of learning, allowing readers to plan, monitor, and evaluate their comprehension while reading. The effect of these cognitive factors on reading is significant. A strong working memory can enhance the ability to make inferences and understand complex sentences, thereby improving comprehension. Effective phonological processing enables quicker word recognition, which contributes to a smoother reading experience and better overall comprehension. Metacognitive strategies empower readers to overcome comprehension hurdles and extract deeper meaning from texts.

2.2. Language Interference

Language interference, often referred to as language transfer, occurs when the learner's first language (L1) knowledge affects the learning and use of a second language (L2). This can happen at various linguistic levels, including syntax, vocabulary, and phonology, and can either facilitate or impede L2 reading. Positive transfer happens when similarities between L1 and L2 lead to correct guesses or understandings, while negative transfer can result in errors or misunderstandings when the languages differ in certain aspects.

In terms of reading, language interference can manifest as difficulties in understanding texts that use structures or vocabulary not present in the learner's native language. It can also lead to slower

reading speeds if the learner vocally translates L2 words back to L1 while reading, a process known as reverse transfer. However, when L1 and L2 share cognates or similar grammatical structures, language interference can actually aid in comprehension and speed up the reading process.

2.3. Learner Motivation

Learner motivation is the internal drive that propels individuals to engage with and persist in learning activities. Motivation in language learning can be intrinsic, driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task itself, or extrinsic, driven by external rewards or pressures. Motivation affects not only the amount of time and effort a learner is willing to invest in reading in an L2 but also the strategies they employ and their overall attitude towards the task.

The impact of motivation on L2 reading is multifaceted. A motivated learner is more likely to engage with texts beyond their comfort level, seek out additional reading materials, and persist in the face of comprehension difficulties. They are also more inclined to employ and develop effective reading strategies, which can lead to improved comprehension. Conversely, a lack of motivation can result in disengagement, minimal effort, and the avoidance of reading activities, stunting the development of reading proficiency.

2.4. Interaction of Internal Factors

The internal factors of cognitive processes, language interference, and learner motivation do not operate in isolation but interact with each other in complex ways. For instance, a learner with strong cognitive skills may be better equipped to handle negative language interference. Their working memory allows them to hold both L1 and L2 structures in mind and choose the correct one for comprehension. Additionally, a motivated learner may invest time in developing metacognitive strategies, which can mitigate the effects of language interference by enabling them to recognize and correct errors.

Conversely, language interference can affect motivation. If a learner experiences frequent negative transfer leading to misunderstanding or slow comprehension, they may become frustrated or discouraged, decreasing their motivation to read in L2.

Furthermore, the relationship between cognitive factors and motivation is reciprocal. High levels of motivation can lead learners to be more persistent in developing their cognitive skills such as expanding working memory capacity or refining phonological processing abilities. Moreover, learners with strong cognitive skills may achieve success through efforts, which in turn stimulate their intrinsic motivation and encourage them to engage even more deeply with L2 texts.

3. External Influencing Factors of Bilingual Reading

External factors can shape the learning environment and create conditions that either facilitate or hinder the development of L2 reading proficiency. This section explores the educational context, socioeconomic factors, technological tools, and digital literacy, as well as the language complexity and reading strategies, examining their individual effects on reading and how they interact with each other.

3.1. Educational Context

The educational context includes the formal instructional setting, teaching methodologies, and the availability of resources. Classroom environment, teacher expertise, and peer interactions are all part of this context and have profound impacts on L2 reading development. Instructional strategies that emphasize reading comprehension, such as extensive reading programs or targeted vocabulary

instruction, can significantly improve students' reading abilities. The presence of skilled educators who can provide adaptive feedback and scaffold learning experiences is also crucial.

Moreover, classrooms that foster a positive attitude towards reading and offer a diverse array of reading materials can motivate students to engage more deeply with texts. The frequency and quality of reading activities integrated into the curriculum can either provide ample opportunities for practice and exposure or, conversely, limit the development of reading skills if inadequate.

3.2. Socioeconomic Factors

Socioeconomic status (SES) has a sweeping impact on L2 reading proficiency. Access to educational resources, such as private tutoring, extracurricular reading programs, and educational materials, is often correlated with higher SES. Furthermore, learners from higher SES backgrounds may have more opportunities to travel or participate in cultural exchanges that can enhance their exposure to and use of the L2 in authentic contexts, thus improving their reading skills.

The home environment is also a factor, where the presence of books and other reading materials in the family setting can encourage reading from a young age. Parental involvement and the emphasis placed on education can influence children's attitudes toward reading and their willingness to invest time in developing their L2 reading abilities.

3.3. Technological Tools and Digital Literacy

The proliferation of digital media and the internet has introduced new dimensions to L2 reading. Technological tools and platforms provide access to a vast array of reading materials, from e-books to online articles and forums. Digital literacy, the ability to navigate, understand, and critically evaluate information from digital sources, is becoming increasingly essential.

Digital tools can support reading development by offering personalized learning experiences, instant access to dictionaries, and translation services that aid comprehension. Interactive features and multimedia resources can also enhance engagement and provide contextual cues that support the understanding of texts. However, the digital divide can exacerbate inequalities if access to technology and digital resources is uneven across different populations.

3.4. Language Complexity and Reading Strategy

The complexity of the language in L2 reading materials can greatly influence reading comprehension. Texts that are dense with unfamiliar vocabulary, complex syntax, or abstract concepts present a higher cognitive load for readers. Simplified texts can facilitate comprehension but would be too easy for the readers to gain advanced development of reading ability.

Reading strategies that are taught and employed can mediate the effects of language complexity. Readers can use techniques such as skimming for the main idea, scanning for specific information, and using context clues to infer the meaning of unknown words. These strategies can empower learners to tackle more complex texts and extract meaning effectively.

3.5. Interaction of External Factors

The external factors influencing L2 reading are interrelated and can amplify or mitigate each other's effects. For instance, the educational context can either bridge or widen the gap created by socioeconomic factors. A robust educational system with adequate resources can provide all learners with quality reading materials and instruction, compensating for a lack of resources at home.

Technological tools and digital literacy can democratize access to reading materials and learning opportunities, potentially lessening the impact of SES. Moreover, the educational context can

influence the effectiveness of reading strategies in dealing with language complexity. Educators can teach strategies that help students navigate complex texts, making the language more accessible. When these strategies are internalized, learners can apply them across digital platforms, further enhancing their reading capabilities in a technologically driven world.

4.   Cultural Factors

Cultural factors exert a considerable influence on second-language reading and can be perceived as both internal and external elements. Culture shapes individuals' worldviews, values, and attitudes, impacting the way they engage with and interpret texts. This section explores the multifaceted effects of culture on L2 reading and its interaction with other factors.

4.1.   The Effect of Culture on Reading

Culture influences reading in several ways, from the content and context of reading materials to the cognitive frameworks that readers use to interpret texts. Readers bring their own cultural backgrounds to the reading process, which can affect their understanding and interpretation of a text's themes, characters, and settings. Cultural references, idioms, and humor that are not shared across cultures may be confusing or misinterpreted, leading to a lack of comprehension or engagement.

The cultural background also influences reading habits and literacy practices. Societies that place a high value on literacy and reading may encourage these practices from an early age, fostering positive attitudes and higher proficiency in reading. In contrast, cultures with oral traditions may prioritize other forms of knowledge transmission, which may impact the development of reading skills.

4.2.   Interaction with Internal Factors

Cultural factors interact with internal factors such as cognitive processing and learner motivation in complex ways. A learner's cultural background can affect their cognitive engagement with a text, particularly if the material is culturally distant from their own experiences. For instance, cultural familiarity can facilitate schema activation—a cognitive process where prior knowledge is used to understand and interpret new information. A lack of schema activation due to cultural unfamiliarity can make comprehension more challenging.

Cultural factors also intertwine with learner motivation. When learners encounter texts that reflect their own culture or provide insights into cultures they are interested in, their intrinsic motivation can increase. Conversely, if the reading material consistently excludes or misrepresents their culture, learners may feel alienated, potentially decreasing their motivation to engage with L2 texts.

4.3.   Interaction with External Factors

Externally, cultural factors are evident in the educational context, where the cultural makeup of the classroom and the cultural perspectives of the curriculum can influence L2 reading experiences. Educational materials that include diverse cultural perspectives can enrich the learning environment, providing a broader context for understanding and engaging with different cultures.

Technological tools and digital literacy provide opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and access to a wider range of cultural perspectives. Digital platforms can bridge cultural gaps by allowing learners to explore texts from around the world, thereby broadening their cultural understanding and enhancing their reading experiences. However, this exchange requires both access to technology and the ability to critically evaluate the cultural content encountered online.

5. Conclusion

The examination of the landscape of second-language (L2) reading has unveiled a large collection of influential factors, spanning cognitive, linguistic, motivational, socioeconomic, technological, and cultural domains. Cognitive elements, encompassing working memory and metacognitive strategies, have been identified as crucial facilitators of comprehension and retention of L2 texts. Language interference has surfaced as a dual-faceted instrument, presenting both pedagogical barriers and benefits for cross-linguistic enrichment. Learner motivation has proven to be an indispensable determinant of involvement and triumph in L2 reading pursuits. Externally, socioeconomic circumstances and access to technological resources have been acknowledged for their roles in shaping educational prospects and available resources for L2 learners. Cultural factors, bridging internal and external spheres, have been noted to significantly impact interpretive frameworks and engagement with reading materials.

While this research strives to be comprehensive, it does have its constraints. This paper dose not empirically explore the interaction between these factors, nor does it delve into differences among individual learners. Follow-up research can explore the correlation between factors empirically and focus on the ability of individual learners.

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