Reading is an important means to access knowledge and information. However, reading is not an innate skill (Wolf, 2007). It requires a lengthy learning process to master. In the current globalized society, an increasing population faces a very challenging task. In addition to learning to read in their first language (L1), they also need to learn to read in their second language (L2), to receive an education, earn a living, or deal with daily events. When learning to read in an L2, most learners are equipped with reading skills for their L1. How does L1 literacy background influence the acquisition of L2 reading? To what extent do L1 reading experiences facilitate/interfere the development of L2 reading?

Learning to Read Across Languages: Cross-Linguistic Relationships in First- and Second-Language Literacy Development, edited by Koda and Zehler, aims to provide answers to these questions. As a country with many immigrants, the United States has a large number of students (four million in grades K-12 in 2002, p.1) who have to learn to read in their second language (i.e., English) for academic purposes. In order to help these students become skilled English readers, the U.S. Department of Education funded a project named Research on the Transfer of Literacy Skills from Languages with Non-Roman Script to English: Feasibility and Pilot Study. This book is the output of the project. The purpose of the book is to systematically examine the impacts of L1 literacy experience on L2 reading development from the perspective of metalinguistic awareness by studying five typologically different languages.

The organization of the book is straightforward. The first of the 10 chapters introduces the concept of reading transfer, while the following eight chapters are divided into two parts: the first part includes three chapters providing an overview of theoretical frameworks; the second part includes five chapters, each of which discusses one non-Romance language. The last chapter recapitulates the main ideas of the book and suggests directions for future research. The organization of the book makes it easy to choose which chapter to read based on one’s needs. Those who wish to become familiar with theoretical frameworks may consult the three chapters in Part I; those who are interested in literacy development in one particular language may jump directly to one of the five chapters in Part II.

Chapter 1 is an introduction of the whole book. Koda and Zehler point out that
there is an urgent call for research on reading transfer, because many immigrant students in the United States fall behind their peers academically due to their poor English reading skills. Systematic examination of the effects of L1 literacy experiences on L2 learning to read will help educators to find a more efficient way to help the development of English reading in those immigrant students. However, reading transfer is a considerable complex research topic because it involves learners of different ages, with different L1 backgrounds, at different learning stages, in different learning context, etc. Existing studies are far from sufficient to understand how these factors contribute to learning to read an L2. In this book, reading is viewed as a psycholinguistic construct. Within the framework of transfer, universal principles as well as language-specific variations in reading are identified through metalinguistic awareness.

Chapter 2, 3, and 4 comprise the first part of the book. Three leading scholars in the field (i.e. Perfetti, Anderson, and Koda) along with their collaborators contribute three comprehensive overview articles, which address the relationship between writing systems and reading processes, the role of metalinguistic awareness in reading, and reading transfer respectively.

Perfetti and Dunlap exhibit how the configuration of written languages influences reading processes in Chapter 2 (see Joshi & Aaron, 2006 for extended reading). They claim that written languages can be similar to or different from each other at three hierarchical levels: writing system (e.g., alphabetic writing system vs. syllabic writing system), orthography (e.g., English orthography vs. German orthography), and script (e.g., voweled Hebrew vs. unvoweled Hebrew). The universal principles of reading processes hold across and within the three levels, whereas language-specific variations occur at the writing system level and the orthography level. The authors propose two universal principles. One is the Language Constraint on Writing Systems, which states that all written languages encode spoken languages instead of meaning. The other is the Universal Phonological Principle, which states that all written languages activate phonology in reading. Abundant studies ranging from priming to brain imaging are cited to demonstrate the similarities and differences of reading processes within and across writing systems. For example, Paulesu and his colleagues (Paulesu, Démonet, et al., 2000; Paulesu, McCrory, et al., 2001) found that there are similarities as well as differences in reading Italian and English. Although both native Italian speakers and native English speakers read real words faster than non-words, the former read both types of words faster than the latter. This suggests that the sublexical letter-phoneme mapping plays a more important role in reading transparent languages like Italian, while lexical look-up retrieval is encouraged by less transparent languages like English. This finding is consistent with
what they found in a position emission tomography (PET) study. Many identical brain regions are activated when reading the two languages. However, the region processing phoneme-grapheme correspondence (i.e., the superior temporal region) is more active when reading Italian than when reading English. Perfetti and Dunlap extend the discussion to bilinguals whose two languages (i.e., Chinese and English) belong to different writing systems. One particular interesting finding comes from Nelson et al.’s (2005) fMRI study. It was found that after studying Chinese for one year, native English speakers recruited new brain regions, the regions that native Chinese speakers use to process Chinese, for Chinese reading. In contrast, Chinese learners of English used similar regions to read both Chinese and English. This suggests that native English speakers developed new reading skills for Chinese orthography, whereas native Chinese speakers adopted the same reading strategies for both Chinese and English. This chapter gives a nice macro view of written languages. It is distinct from other chapters in the book by immersing its audience in the literature of Romance language research. The authors balance their discussion between studies involving child participants and studies involving adult participants. This chapter also exposes its audience to many different paradigms for studying the effects of writing system or orthography on reading by reviewing a large numbers of studies.

In Chapter 3, Kuo and Anderson offer a thorough introduction to metalinguistic awareness, the ability to identify, analyze, and manipulate the structural features of languages. The authors point out that although metalinguistic awareness has been recognized as a key component in reading development, there is no agreement yet about the constituents of metalinguistic awareness. The controversial issues include whether metalinguistic awareness requires explicit mental representations of language properties, whether metalinguistic research emphasizes the declarative or procedural aspects of cognitive processes, and whether consciousness plays a role in metalinguistic awareness. Among the six types of metalinguistic awareness (i.e., phonological awareness, semantic awareness, morphological awareness, syntactic awareness, grapho-phonological awareness, and grapho-morphological awareness) discussed in the chapter, phonological awareness and syntactic awareness have obviously received more attention from reading researchers than others. How each type of metalinguistic awareness is currently assessed nowadays and how transfer of metalinguistic awareness is studied are well-presented in the chapter. Kuo and Anderson identify many research gaps. For instance, in addition to syllable, onset-rime, and phoneme, phonological awareness also need to include suprasegmental phonological units such as tone and stress. One big research gap is not brought up in the chapter: most existing studies in metalinguistic awareness only involve child participants. The lack of research data from adolescents and adults
makes it difficult to gain a complete picture of the development of metalinguistic awareness, especially for the acquisition of L2 reading. Since not all learners start to learn a second language at a young age, it is imperative to unveil constraints on transfer of metalinguistic awareness involving different age groups. For instance, it is worthwhile to investigate whether there is a critical period for a certain type of metalinguistic awareness to transfer from L1 to L2 or vice versa.

Koda proposes the Transfer Facilitation Model in Chapter 4 to account for how L1 metalinguistic awareness influences L2 literacy development. This model postulates four hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that L1 metalinguistic awareness can be used in L2 reading. Existing studies suggest that phonological awareness developed in L1 is a good predictor of decoding skills in L1 as well as in L2. It is not clear whether other types of metalinguistic awareness can also be shared by L1 and L2 reading. The second hypothesis is that with sophisticated L1 metalinguistic awareness, learners require far less L2 input to develop L2 metalinguistic awareness. American adult learners of Chinese were found to be sensitive to the internal structure of Chinese characters after one-year exposure to Chinese (see Everson & Ke, 1997; Ke, 1998; Wang et al., 2003b). Koda attributes the fast grasp of Chinese character information to the sophisticated metalinguistic awareness developed in L1 (i.e., English), although the two languages are very different. The third hypothesis is that the distance between L1 and L2 (i.e., how similar/different the two languages are) partially, if not fully, determines the rate of L2 reading development. It has been found that English learners with alphabetic L1 backgrounds outperformed those with non-alphabetic L1 backgrounds (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). However, Muljani et al. (1998) showed that this advantage of language distance appeared only when L1 and L2 requires the same processing demands. Their Indonesian participants did not benefit much from their L1 literacy background when processing words with spelling patterns unique to English. The fourth hypothesis is that L2 metalinguistic awareness and reading skills reflect the linguistic and orthographic properties of L1 and L2, and they vary systematically in different L1 backgrounds. Wang et al. (2003a) asked a Korean group and a Chinese group to perform a semantic category judgment task in English. Although both groups of participants used phonological and graphic information to process English words, Korean participants were more affected by phonological similarity, while Chinese participants were more affected by graphic similarity. It is not clear whether the Transfer Facilitation Model is more than a collection of four hypotheses, and thus may need more development before it can provide a framework for research.

Five typologically different languages (i.e., Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Khmer, and Korean) are separately discussed in each chapter from Chapter 5 to Chapter 9.
One of the biggest advantages of this part is that these chapters all follow a similar format in presentation, which makes the comparison among languages straightforward. In the beginning of each chapter, a description of the target language is provided from the perspective of different linguistic components (i.e., phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and discourse). The description also explains how these linguistic components are encoded in the language’s writing system. This section is very useful for people whose work is relevant to the language, especially for computational engineers who work on machine translation and language teachers who work with students with diverse language backgrounds. After presenting the required metalinguistic awareness and reading skills to read the target language, the authors compare the similarities and differences in reading the target language versus English. The authors then review studies in reading the target language as a first language, reading a second language with the target language as a first language, and reading the target language as a second language. At last, the impacts of social and cultural factors on learning to read the target language as a first language are discussed. The idea of presenting five typologically different languages in this format is helpful, because audience will have an understanding of the linguistic and orthographic characteristics of a language, and all relevant knowledge about reading in the language.

Unfortunately, no Roman languages are presented in this format in this book. It would provide a more complete picture of current research on literacy development if the second part of book included Roman languages, since most existing knowledge about literacy development is built on research on alphabetic Roman languages. Although Perfetti and Dunlap cited quite a few studies on Roman languages in Chapter 2, it would be useful that Roman languages were introduced from their unique linguistic features to what challenges their learners face when acquiring these language as their L1 or L2.

The five chapters in the second part of the book illustrate several important research gaps. Firstly, more attention needs to be given to non-Roman languages in reading research. As Koda admits in Chapter 10, among the five non-Roman languages, only Chinese and Hebrew have a critical mass of empirical studies in literacy development. Arabic and Korean have some empirical research, and no research on Khmer could be found (p.227). It is disappointing to find out there is little or no empirical data when reading the chapter of Arabic and the chapter of Khmer. In these two chapters, the section which reviews learning to read in the language as L1 or L2 and learning to read a second language with this language as an L1 is filled with the authors’ speculations. Without empirical research available, the authors can only guess what might happen in reading the language based on the linguistic and orthographic analysis of the language. Secondly, most studies reviewed in these
chapters were carried out with school-age children, including kindergarteners and elementary school students. Intermediate and advanced readers are rarely the focus of the studies. It is important to study the initial stages of literacy development, so that we can help children in the beginning of their reading development. However, the middle stage and the last stage of literacy development are indispensable for a complete picture of reading development. Moreover, many adolescents and adults also have reading problems and need professional help to improve their reading skills.

In Chapter 10, the last chapter of the book, Koda restates that this book aims to establish a systematic comparison in learning to read different languages within the framework of transfer by studying metalinguistic awareness. Reading universals and cross-linguistic variation are the two contrasting yet complementary perspectives taken in the book. She also points out several research gaps such as the lack of sufficient studies in languages other than English, the lack of a theory to account for the transfer of reading experiences, the lack of attention to reading skills other than phonological awareness and decoding, and so on. Most importantly, she suggests three directions for future research. First, research on reading transfer should go beyond phonological awareness and decoding, since reading requires more other types of metalinguistic awareness and reading skills. Second, learner-external factors such as the age of acquisition of second language reading, the mismatch of home language and school language, the instruction of first language reading, etc. should be taken into account when studying reading transfer. Third, reading development is a long-term process, so it is essential to conduct longitudinal studies to understand the impacts of L1 literacy experiences over time.

The book shows that the reading transfer is a promising field worth of more extensive and deep exploration. The many research gaps mentioned in the book indicate that reading transfer has not received the attention it deserves. Researchers should keep in mind that reading processes occur at several levels (i.e., word, phrase, sentence, and discourse level). However, most current research only focuses on single word reading or discourse reading. Existing psycholinguistic reading models explain exclusively how single words are decoded and processed (see review in Coltheart, 2006; Seidenberg, 2007; Seidenberg, in press). Given that word is not the only unit of orthography processed in the procedure of reading, reading research should be extended to phrase level and sentence level.

Researchers should also keep in mind that, before studying reading transfer, we should carry out sufficient studies on L1 literacy development first. To take Khmer as an example, before we can study whether reading skills developed for reading Khmer can transfer to reading other languages, we need to find out what reading skills are developed in those who read Khmer as a first language. Otherwise, it is hard to decide
the reading skills that learners have for reading a second language come from L1 literacy background or some other external factors such as individual differences, L2 reading instructions, the context in which the learners learn the L2, etc. In other words, the prerequisite of studying reading transfer is to have a thorough understanding of L1 literacy development.

*Learning to Read Across Languages* is a good resource book for any one interested in reading processes in L1 and L2, and how L1 literacy experiences facilitate L2 reading development. It consists of theoretical frameworks as well as discussion for five non-Roman languages with empirical research. Interesting knowledge such as Khmer is similar to Chinese in syntax although the two languages are encoded in quite different writing systems, reading Arabic and Hebrew in an unvoweled script is much more challenging than reading in a voweled script, and the consonant symbols of Korean Hangul represent the shapes of the speech articulators can be found in the book. A beginner in the field of literacy development will gain much of the information necessary for starting a novel research project. Prior knowledge about linguistics and literacy development is not required, because all major chapters (from Chapter 2 to Chapter 9) provide clear definitions for technical terms. This book is recommended for graduate students and researchers in linguistics, psycholinguistics, language education, and machine translation. This book is particularly indispensible for language teachers who need to work with students with different L1 backgrounds. After reading this book, they will understand better students’ problems in reading their second language, and what assistance they should provide to help the students master second language reading.

References


