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Learning to Read in Different Orthographies: Implications of First Language Korean Orthography on Learning to Read English

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Introduction

“Learning two or more languages is an extraordinary, complicated cognitive investment for children, that represents a growing reality for huge numbers of children” (Wolf, 2007, p. 105). For children currently living and learning in Korea, this statement could not come closer to capturing the truth. Learning English proficiently has become a national obsession. English programs are being implemented in all facets of Korean society. Public schools and most private schools have begun intensive programs with daily English instruction. Furthermore, children are often taught to read English formally, after school and at home. A survey in 2002 reported that over 50% of primary school children have private lessons in English after school (Korean Association of Child Studies & Hansol Education Research Center, 2002). Reading research about Korean children learning English is paramount, not only for developing successful programs, but also for ensuring reading success in these children.

Orthographic Processing

- ♦ “the use of that knowledge [specific conventions and rules concerning the visual and orthographic aspects of print], to abilities that concern the more visual and holistic aspects of reading, such as memory for letters, letter patterns, and words” (Kirby, Desrochers, Roth, & Lai, 2008)
- ♦ “children’s sensitivity to the orthographic structure of words” (Georgiou, Parrila, & Papadopoulos, 2008)
- ♦ “children’s understanding of the conventions used in the writing system of their language” (Wang, Park, & Lee, 2006)

Implications

Although the Korean writing system is similar to English in its mapping principles, it is different in representation and depth. In Hangul, the grapheme to phoneme correspondences are highly transparent. That is, each grapheme maps onto to only one phoneme. Conversely, English is an opaque orthography. Letters can map onto more than one sound. The special combination of these similarities and differences in orthography make the demands of learning to read in Korean and English unique (Hamada & Koda, 2008; Wang & Koda, 2007; Wang, Koda, & Perfetti, 2003), especially with respect to the processes involved with skilled word decoding (Coltheart, Rastle, Perry, Langdon, & Ziegler, 2001). Explicit orthographic instruction may be necessary for this group of learners.

“The invention of writing, which occurred independently in distant parts of the world at many times, even occasionally in the modern era, must rank among mankind’s highest intellectual achievements. Without writing, human culture as we know it today is inconceivable.”

(Tzeng & Wang, 1983, p. 239)

Korean Hangul

Korean Hangul is a distinctive alphabetic orthography when compared to other alphabetic orthographies inasmuch as it shares similar grapheme (letter or symbol) to phoneme (sound) mapping principles; however, it differs in visual form because of its spatial configuration. In this respect it is unique, as the individual symbols must be packaged into blocks which are then used to form words. Hangul symbols never appear alone. In fact, the overall shape of each syllable is more similar to the logographic Chinese than to its fellow alphabetic orthographies (Wang, Park, & Lee, 2006). Each Hangul syllable is built of two to four symbols; these syllables are assembled linearly to form words, usually left to right, although traditional top to bottom alignment is also acceptable. Each syllable block is read from left to right and top to bottom. There are 24 basic Hangul graphemes: 14 consonants and 10 vowels.

Consonants															
ㄱ	ㄴ	ㄷ	ㄹ	ㅁ	ㅂ	ㅅ	ㅇ	ㅈ	ㅊ	ㅋ	ㆁ	ㄷ	ㅌ	ㅍ	ㅎ
g,k	n	d,t	r,l	m	b,p	s	ng	j	ch	k	t	p	h		
[silent in initial position]															
ㅊ	ㅌ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ	ㅍ
kk	tt	pp	ss	jj											
Vowels															
ㅏ	ㅑ	ㅓ	ㅕ	ㅗ	ㅛ	ㅜ	ㅠ	ㅡ	ㅣ						
a	ya	eo	y eo	o	yo	u	yu	eu	i						
father	saw	home	moon	put	meat										
ㅘ	ㅙ	ㅚ	ㅜ	ㅝ	ㅞ	ㅟ	ㅠ	ㅡ	ㅣ						
ae	y ae	e	ye	wa	w ae	oe	wo	w e	w i	u					
hand	set														

For more information about different orthographies:
www.omniglot.com

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Orthographic Depth Hypothesis

- ♦ The basic proposal of the Orthographic Depth Hypothesis is that the transparency of the relationship between the script of a language and its phonology varies between orthographies, and that such variations result in different processes for word decoding (Katz & Frost, 1992; Akamatsu, 1998).
- ♦ Studies have concluded that the transfer of reading skills from a nonalphabetic L1 to an alphabetic L2 differ from the transfer between two alphabetic writing systems (Akamatsu, 2003; Hamada & Koda, 2008; Wang, Koda, & Perfetti, 2002).
- ♦ Korean English language learners may acquire many of the skills necessary for word reading in another alphabetic orthography like English, but those skills may not be sufficient (Hamada & Koda, 2008).
- ♦ Orthographic transfer may be limited as English is a linear orthographic system while Korean is nonlinear (Wang, Park, & Lee, 2006).

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“We were never born to read. Human beings invented reading only a few thousand years ago. And with this invention, we rearranged the very organization of our brain, which in turn expanded the ways we were able to think, which altered the evolution of our species. Reading is one of the single most remarkable inventions in history.”

(Wolf, 2007, p. 3)