What account for L2 reading performance: The case of secondary school EFL learners in Japan

Junko Yamashita¹, Toshihiko Shiotsu²

¹Nagoya University, Japan
²Kurume University, Japan

Researchers have sought to identify sources of ability differences in L2 reading. So far, L2 knowledge (L2K), mostly lexical and grammatical, have tended to emerge as the best correlates of reading comprehension, but there have been recent reports on the significance of general language comprehension as manifested in listening comprehension skills (L2L) (Yamashita and Shiotsu, 2015; Shiotsu, 2015). Also, although its impact may often be overshadowed by the strengths of the above-mentioned components, the learners’ L1 reading competency (L1R) has long been considered as an additional predictor of L2 reading success. Methodologically, most related studies to date relied on a single assessment method for each of the constructs involved, an area that can be improved by introducing multiple methods per construct.

Secondary school EFL students in Japan (n=423, age 14-18) demonstrated their reading comprehension of expository and narrative texts, assessed with multiple-choice and short-answer formats. At least two test formats were employed in each of the L2K, L2L, and L1R instruments as well.

Student responses were initially submitted to a series of IRT analyses, and the estimates of their competencies were then taken as observed indicator variables in Structural Equation Modelling, in which both the direct and indirect effects of latent component skills on L2 reading were empirically measured.

Based on a model with the best fit to the empirical data, it was revealed that the three latent predictors of L2K, L2L and L1R jointly accounted for over 95 percent of the variance in L2 Reading Comprehension, and among these predictors, L2K was the best predictor, in terms of both direct and indirect effects, followed by L2L and L1R. Such results are discussed, consulting the literature to refine/improve our conceptualizations of L2 reading components.

Keywords: L2 reading comprehension, L1 reading comprehension, L2 listening comprehension, L2 knowledge, components.