The effect of L2 proficiency on reading performance in Russian-Chinese and Chinese-Russian late bilinguals

Mashanlo T. E.

National Research Tomsk State University, Tomsk, Russia

mashanlote@gmail.com

The aim of the study is to investigate the effect of L2 proficiency on reading performance in late bilinguals learning to read in a different writing system. Russian and Chinese writing systems are dissimilar in the way the sounds of the language are represented in writing. Russian Cyrillic is an alphabetic writing system utilising a phoneme-grapheme correspondence, in which there is a limited set of graphemes representing different sounds of speech. On the other hand, each character in the Chinese logographic system encodes not a single phoneme but rather a morpheme or an entire word, thus increasing the total amount of units used in writing. In order to establish how bilinguals adapt to reading in writing systems that are based on different underlying encoding principles I set up an experiment in which 31 Russian-Chinese and 28 Chinese-Russian bilinguals with varying degrees of proficiency in L2 read both in Chinese and Russian. Four eye movement measures (average fixation duration, average progressive/regressive saccade length, frequency of regressions) were recorded using an SMI RED 500 eye-tracking system. The results indicate that the average fixation duration of Russian-Chinese bilinguals decreased as their proficiency in L2 increased. Three saccadic measures remained constant across participants of all levels. The Chinese-Russian bilingual group showed no effect of L2 proficiency on any of the four eye movement measures. Such a result could in part be explained by an early and extended exposure to alphabetic writing systems such as the English alphabet and the Chinese Pinyin.

Keywords: L2, reading, eye movements.