In Their Own Words: An Interview with Fredricka Stoller & Bill Grabe

by Brad Blackstone
National University of Singapore (Singapore)

A cursory search through any academic database under the topics of reading and reading research in specific or applied linguistics in general will yield two names with great consistency: Bill Grabe and Fredricka Stoller. Bill is Regents’ Professor of Applied Linguistics and Vice President for Research at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. Fredricka is Professor of Applied Linguistics at the same institution. Their common interests range from the obvious academic pursuits of research in applied linguistics and ESL methodology and pedagogy to opera, hiking and gardening.

Whether working as independent writers or as collaborators, Professors Grabe and Stoller have contributed immeasurably to the area of applied linguistics, most especially in the companion domains of reading research and pedagogy, enhancing our understanding of what reading is and how to best teach it.

Teaching and Researching Reading (2nd edition 2011) is one of the seminal works that Fredricka and Bill have co-authored. Presented as a volume in Candlin and Hall’s lauded Applied Linguistics in Action series, it is comprehensive in its scope, methodically summarizing the nature of reading within both L1 and L2 contexts, discussing some of the more relevant dilemmas appearing within reading research and instruction, and probing the developments suggested by key studies. The book offers a wealth of useful information as it clearly “builds connections from research on reading to sound instructional practices and action research possibilities.”
While directing studies in the MA TESL and PhD in Applied Linguistics programs at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Bill and Fredricka have long been nurturing skilled language teaching practitioners and researchers. Their efforts are furthered by the numerous lectures and workshops they have offered worldwide. One such workshop, entitled “Techniques for Developing Students’ Reading Fluency,” was recently part of the program for the 4th Symposium hosted by the Centre for English Language Communication at the National University of Singapore. In that workshop, participants were reminded of the main elements of reading fluency, including automaticity, accuracy, reading rate and word- and passage-reading fluency. They were also introduced to a number of practical techniques using classroom materials that can help liven a classroom and give students an opportunity to enhance their reading fluency.

Throughout the workshop, Bill and Fredricka demonstrated just how engaging they are as workshop leaders, bringing various audience members into the activities that illustrated the value of choral reading/readers’ theater. I was also struck by how well they worked in tandem. As they spoke, they seemed to be riffing off each other, much in the same way that two virtuoso singers might find creative inspiration while performing side by side. That was when the idea of interviewing them “together” seemed like a logical next step.

An interview with Fredricka Stoller and Bill Grabe
Brad: Both of you have had illustrious careers in applied linguistics. What is the story behind your initial inspiration for studying reading skills development and other aspects of language learning?

Fredricka: For me, it all started with my own language learning experiences as a foreign student in Padova, Italy. That full year studying abroad - 1972-1973 - changed just about everything for me - the books I like to read, the movies I like to watch, the food I like to try, and my career trajectories. That year inspired me to pursue graduate studies related to teaching English as a second/foreign language, followed by years of (a) teaching EFL and ESL and (b) training teachers to do the same. My initial interests in reading-skills development, specifically, began in graduate school and took off during my early years of teaching EFL in Barcelona, Spain. There, and since then, I’ve always been motivated to give
my language students access to real-world information, even at beginning levels, through interesting texts.

**Bill:** I took a course on second language reading from Professor Jim Coady, at Ohio University, in 1977. That course developed my interests in reading and linking theory and research to instruction. From 1978 on, I was a student of David Eskey’s and we had many discussions about second language reading throughout my six years at the University of Southern California. I would also say that my interest in reading came from the already very large English L1 reading research literature that identified many advances - and a continuing stream of advances - in how we can understand reading abilities, as well as the issues that arise out of the complex cognitive skills that underlie written comprehension abilities. Our abilities to understand written texts in fast and accurate ways are really sort of miraculous.

**Brad:** (for Fredricka) You have written extensively on integrated skills and content-based learning. What initiated this interest?

**Fredricka:** Integrated-skills instruction and content-based instruction just make sense! Language instruction, void of interesting content, rarely motivates students. And in most settings, teaching discrete skills simply doesn’t prepare students for the realities of their future language use. Furthermore, numerous personal experiences — as a language student and language teacher - have stimulated my interests in integrated-skills instruction and content-based instruction. As a language student, I experienced less-than-motivating - almost numbing - language learning classes where the exclusive focus was on grammar and/or on rote memorization. I certainly wouldn’t want the same for my students! As a teacher, I have almost always had students with pressing needs for improved language abilities. Integrated-skills instruction simply makes sense in those contexts as does Content-based Instruction (CBI). I like the idea of not only teaching language but also sending students out of my classes as more knowledgeable citizens of the world. We can all do that with CBI.

**Brad:** It has been argued that we all learn to read by reading. Should explicit teaching of reading strategies be part of that process? How can they be taught? Can you both give some general guidelines for teachers, please?
Fredricka: It is true that one can only learn to read by reading. Bill has said many times, and in many venues, that there are no shortcuts! But reading by itself is not sufficient, nor is it efficient, especially for students who want to and/or need to become good readers. Research has shown, in L1 and L2 settings that students benefit from explicit reading instruction that focuses not only on strategic-reader abilities but also main-idea comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency.

Bill: In L1 contexts, we all need to have teachers, mentors, and parents who teach us, guide us, and support our developing literacy skills. Otherwise, we would not learn how to read. So reading is most effectively learned by a combination of extensive exposure to print and effective instructional supports.

Fredricka: Let’s focus specifically on reading strategies now. Entire volumes have been written on reading strategies in L1 contexts and, though fewer in number, books and articles have also been written on L2 reading strategies. Distinctions are often made, and should be made, between teaching strategies and training strategic readers. We probably should all consider training strategic readers, rather than teaching one strategy at a time, in de-contextualized lessons, as the true goal for reading strategy development.

Bill: While the goal is developing the strategic reader, we still need to introduce strategies one or two at a time. But after a strong set of useful strategies are introduced, they then need to be used repeatedly to make their use part of students’ regular reading habits. This is most often done by engaging students in efforts to comprehend texts that may be somewhat challenging and helping them to discuss effective uses of strategies to understand texts better.

Fredricka: One useful teaching tip, for all of us, is to bring strategies to students’ conscious attention and engage students in interactive classroom discussions about which strategies are used to achieve comprehension, in addition to when, where, and why they are used. A key part of reading instruction, then, is creating activities that encourage students to talk about how to use strategies for better comprehension.
Bill: When it comes to comprehension activities following textbook reading passages, a key goal should be to help teach students to learn how to comprehend better rather than to assess comprehension, which is what many teachers tend to do.

Brad: You advocate ‘reading aloud.’ Would you suggest this for all language contexts: first, second and foreign language teaching contexts?

Fredricka: Although reading-for-comprehension is typically a silent activity, in the reading classroom, there is a role for reading aloud. The issue is not what types of students we are talking about, but the issue is what level of proficiency students are at and what sort of instructional goals are set by the institutions in which they are studying. In settings where improving reading abilities is a goal, attention to reading fluency is important. Students who are slow readers need fluency practice, including practice opportunities for reading aloud. Students who want to become advanced readers also need to develop their fluency, including facility in reading aloud. For reading-aloud activities to be effective, teachers should use texts that students are already familiar with and/or texts that are quite easy for their proficiency level.

Bill: The advantage of reading aloud during fluency practice is that it requires students to attend to word recognition and not skip words or ignore letter/sound correspondences. In these cases, L2 students are getting practice in processing the written script more fluently and with less effort over time. The goal for oral reading is not pronunciation practice. In fact, students can read aloud orally with relatively poor pronunciation. A different teacher or a different class can attend to serious and systemic pronunciation problems that might become apparent through oral reading practice.

Fredricka: I’d like to add that reading-aloud activities can be fun too, especially if students understand their purposes. Readers Theater, echo reading, buddy reading, and timed paired readings can add variety to the classroom routine and help students at the same time make gains in their reading fluency.

Brad: The reading medium has moved from print in books to print online. Could you offer
any insights on how readers read online versus on the printed page and the implications for classroom pedagogy?

Fredricka: It’s true that students are now reading in print, online, and on their smart phones. Many reading researchers have written about possible differences between reading print and reading online, but there is little persuasive evidence that identifies strong differences between the two.

Bill: What does seem to be true is that readers online tend to read for shorter time spans and jump from text to text fairly quickly, quite different from the way they read the printed page. Some say that a constant diet of online reading may limit students’ habits to persevere through longer texts, although we don’t have a lot of evidence for this. It is fair to say that advanced academic learning still requires attentive reading of longer informational texts and this ability may not be addressed with a predominant input from short online texts.

Fredricka: At the same time, these days, especially in EFL settings, much of the information that students encounter is online. This is an area that merits more research.

Brad: Which academic questions still nag at you the most?

Fredricka: These days I’m thinking about how teachers can (a) change their orientation from teaching strategies to training strategic readers, within the constraints of their teaching contexts; (b) address reading fluency in an ongoing way; and (c) how teacher trainers can model state-of-the-art teaching practices to not only help novice teachers become better readers themselves but also become state-of-the-art reading teachers. These questions should keep me busy for a while!

Bill: I’m always thinking about issues centered on (a) developing ways to teach reading strategies over an extended period of time, (b) combining content-based instruction with extensive amounts of reading, and (c) developing students’ very large recognition vocabulary. There are several major issues that need to be addressed if we are to help students become good L2 readers, but the three above are good themes to work on with some urgency.
**Brad:** What do you see as the epitome of your life's work?

**Fredricka:** What a question! My professional career has allowed me to explore so many interesting areas, including L2 reading, project-based learning, content-based instruction, and disciplinary writing. It is the latter area, my work in disciplinary writing, that folks in Singapore may not know about. I have had the wonderful opportunity to collaborate with a chemist, over a decade, to analyze the language of chemistry - in four genres - and develop a read-analyze-write approach to disciplinary literacy skills instruction that transitions students from general academic literacy skills to discipline-specific literacy skills. The high point of that collaboration is best characterized by the textbook that we wrote - *Write Like a Chemist*, Oxford University Press - that has given chemistry faculty and chemistry students a tool for addressing students’ needs to master reading and writing in the discipline.

**Bill:** For me, the transition from understanding the nature of L2 reading, to instructional practices that should really make a difference for student learning in classroom settings, is a core long-term focus for my work. In the process, there are a long set of issues to address as well as opportunities to help make learning more effective and students more engaged in their own learning process.

**Brad:** And now one question off to the side: You've written extensively on various areas of language acquisition. While it's clear that you have similar professional interests, what about your other interests?

**Fredricka & Bill (in harmony):** We share a lot of “extracurricular” interests, including opera, hiking, travel, gardening, and reading books, though our reading interests are quite distinct. Bill likes to read thrillers, mysteries, and history in his free time. Fredricka likes to read historical fiction and contemporary stories that take place in other cultures. We are both interested in current world events and stay engaged with “the news” on a daily basis. We see this as part of being citizens of the world and not just of the U.S. Most of our time, however, is devoted to our work at Northern Arizona University where we are part of strong PhD and MA TESL programs.
Acknowledgements
Brad would like to thank Fredricka Stoller and Bill Grabe for their gracious willingness to participate in this interview. He would also like to acknowledge his colleagues, Chitra Varaprasad and Peggie Chan, for their input on the questions.

About the author
Brad Blackstone is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for English Language Communication at the National University of Singapore and Chief Editor of eltworldonline.com (ELTWO). Brad’s teaching experience began 35 years ago with Russian while a graduate student at Ohio State University. Since then, he has developed and coordinated courses and taught in university EAP and English writing programs in the USA, Portugal, Malaysia, Japan and now Singapore. He also has experience in corporate training and teacher development throughout Asia. His most recent presentations and publications focus on the use of social media in teaching and learning.