

Beginning to read across languages varying in orthographic consistency: Comparing the effects of non-cognitive and cognitive predictors

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Abstract

We examined whether the effect that different non-cognitive and cognitive factors have on reading acquisition varies as a function of orthographic consistency. Canadian ($n = 77$) and Greek ($n = 95$) children attending kindergarten were examined on general cognitive ability, phonological sensitivity, and letter knowledge. The parents of the children responded to a questionnaire on home literacy activities and the teachers reported on children's task-focused behaviour. In Grades 1 and 2 the children's word decoding and reading fluency were assessed. Results indicated that direct teaching of letter names and sounds at home was associated with better letter knowledge in both languages. Task-focused behaviour and letter knowledge in kindergarten predicted significantly nonword decoding in Grade 1, but their effect was stronger in English than in Greek. This pattern was not replicated for reading fluency in Grade 2.

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1. Introduction

The importance of phonological sensitivity and letter knowledge on reading development has been well established (Holopainen, Ahonen, & Lyytinen, 2001; de Jong & van der Leij, 1999; Kirby, Parrila, & Pfeiffer, 2003; Lepola, Poskiparta, Laakkonen, & Niemi, 2005; Parrila, Kirby, & McQuarrie, 2004; Wagner et al., 1997). Despite the acknowledged importance of these emergent literacy skills, several issues remain unresolved, including what their origins are, how their predictive strength is influenced by many other non-cognitive and/or environmental factors known to predict reading development, and whether they predict reading similarly across languages that vary in orthographic consistency. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine: (a) the effect of non-cognitive (task-focused behaviour) and environmental (various aspects of home literacy environment)

factors on phonological sensitivity and letter knowledge, (b) the unique and joint contribution of task-focused behaviour, environmental factors, and emergent literacy skills on word decoding and reading fluency, and (c) the effect of orthographic consistency on these relationships.

1.1. Home literacy environment and beginning to read

Home literacy environment (HLE) is an umbrella concept that is normally used to describe a variety of child–parent activities related to literacy (Burgess, 2002; Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Sénéchal, 2006). Shared reading is one of the best known HLE variables in the literature. Shared reading refers to the frequency of storybook reading by the parents to their children. Previous studies have provided conflicting findings with respect to the effects of shared reading on emergent literacy skills (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Foy & Mann, 2003; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). For example, Bus et al.'s (1995) meta-analysis reported a positive association between shared reading and

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children's literacy development whereas Scarborough and Dobrich (1994), based on review of 30 years of literature, concluded that shared reading was not associated with literacy skills as consistently or strongly as could be expected. Several recent studies have provided support for Scarborough and Dobrich's (1994) argument by demonstrating that shared reading is not associated with phonological sensitivity, letter knowledge or word decoding in either inconsistent (Evans et al., 2000; Foy & Mann, 2003; Frijters, Barron, & Brunello, 2000; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Stephenson, Parrila, Georgiou, & Kirby, 2008) or consistent orthographies (de Jong & Leseman, 2001; van Steensel, 2006; Stoep, Bakker, & Verhoeven, 2002). However, it is possible that shared book reading is related to the development of vocabulary knowledge (Frijters et al., 2000; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Torppa et al., 2007), and vocabulary knowledge is then associated with later reading comprehension (de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Sénéchal, 2006; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

Other aspects of HLE seem to be associated more directly with reading skills than shared reading. Informal teaching activities (teaching reading, letters, or writing) taking place at home have been shown to predict phonological sensitivity (Foy & Mann, 2003), letter knowledge (Evans et al., 2000), and early reading skills (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002) in English. In contrast, studies conducted in orthographically consistent languages have found no direct effect of parents' teaching activities on phonological sensitivity (Sénéchal, 2006; van Steensel, 2006) and a small (Leseman & de Jong, 1998) or nonsignificant effect on early reading achievement (Sénéchal, 2006; van Steensel, 2006). However, Torppa et al. (2006) showed with Finnish children that less frequent teaching of letter names at home at 4.5 years of age was associated with delayed letter knowledge development from 4 to 6 years of age. Finally, studies that have examined child's level of engagement during his/her literacy experiences (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared, 2006) have indicated that English-speaking children who are engaged actively by their parents in literacy activities have better emergent literacy skills than children who are engaged in more passive activities (e.g., listening storybooks, watching TV).

Similar to direct teaching and frequency of storybook reading, parents' beliefs and expectations of their children's literacy development can be considered as part of HLE. It is not only the physical interaction with the children that may affect their performance, but also what their parents believe and expect from them. Several researchers have shown that parents' positive beliefs about their children's cognitive or academic ability play an important role on children's school performance (Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2002). To date, no study has examined how parents' beliefs and expectations interact with orthography and other HLE measures to influence later reading achievement. It is possible, for example, parents' beliefs and expectations about their children's future reading ability to elicit more intensive direct teaching or more frequent shared reading.

To summarize, the literature review on the effects of different aspects of HLE on phonological sensitivity, letter knowledge, and reading suggests that in inconsistent orthographies, shared reading may be associated with more general language skills, such as vocabulary knowledge, while more active involvement between parents and their children may be required to directly affect phonological sensitivity and letter knowledge or early word-reading development. However, in consistent orthographies, the relationship appears to be more limited and in most cases insignificant.

1.2. Task-focused behaviour and learning to read

Motivational processes have been shown to affect children's cognitive performance (Wilson & Trainin, 2007). Particularly, achievement strategies that a child deploys in school tasks, such as mastery orientation or task-focused behaviour, are associated with better scholastic outcomes and helplessness beliefs or task-avoidant behaviour are associated with poorer scholastic outcomes (Aunola et al., 2002; Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996). For example, Aunola, Nurmi, Lerkkanen, and Rasku-Puttonen (2003) demonstrated that children's task-avoidance behaviours at school predicted lower achievement in mathematics later on.

In terms of learning to read, Fyrstén, Nurmi, and Lyytinen (2006) found that task-focused behaviour at the age of 6.5 years predicted spontaneous reading acquisition before any formal reading instruction. In addition, several studies have found that elementary school children's reading achievement was predicted by their task-avoidant (Hagtvet, 2000; Onatsu-Arivilommi, & Nurmi, 2000) or task-focused behaviour (Dally, 2006; Lepola, Salonen, & Vauras, 2000; Poskiparta, Niemi, Lepola, Ahtola, & Laine, 2003) in kindergarten.

Importantly, some studies have indicated that the effect of emergent literacy skills on reading acquisition may be mediated by task-focused behaviours. For example, Fyrstén et al. (2006) showed that children who were verbally skilful at age 5 showed a higher level of task-focused behaviour at age 6.5 years that then predicted spontaneous reading acquisition. Similarly, Lepola et al. (2005) showed that task orientation in preschool predicted phonological awareness in kindergarten, which then predicted task orientation at the beginning of Grade 1. Task orientation at the beginning of Grade 1 was a significant predictor of word recognition at the end of Grade 1. Furthermore, some studies have found that task-focused behaviour in kindergarten was a significant predictor of word-reading skill in Grade 1 (Dally, 2006; Salonen, Lepola, & Niemi, 1998), even after controlling for the effects of kindergarten phonological awareness.

In sum, the existing evidence generally supports a significant role of task-focused behaviours on reading achievement in both consistent and inconsistent orthographies. However, no study has directly compared whether the effects of task-focused behaviours on phonological sensitivity, letter knowledge, and reading ability are similar across languages that vary in orthographic consistency.

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