



Being proactive when reading: Academic personal initiative as a predictor of word comprehension development



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ABSTRACT

Academic personal initiative (API) has rarely been studied with regard to literacy development. The purpose of this longitudinal study was therefore to examine the unique effects of API on the development of word comprehension as an indicator of word reading. To this end, the effects of previous word comprehension, intrinsic reading motivation, and basic cognitive ability (i.e., processing speed) were controlled for. A total of 1,515 German students participated in a longitudinal assessment starting in Grades 1 to 3, with a second point of measurement nine months later. Latent change score analyses revealed positive associations between API and gains in word comprehension, both in the total sample and at all grade levels. These relations were robust against the effects of previous word comprehension and intrinsic reading motivation. The findings suggest that children play an active role in their own reading development.

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1. Introduction

Personal initiative defines a personal characteristic that manifests in self-starting, proactive, and persistent behavior (Frese & Fay, 2001). This proactive behavior has been proposed to be relevant in children's developmental and learning processes (Wollny, Fay, & Urbach, 2016). For example, Zimmerman (2002, p. 65) described learning "as an activity that students do for themselves in a proactive way rather than as a covert event that happens to them in reaction to teaching." Thus, self-regulated learning means displaying personal initiative by setting goals, showing perseverance, and acting as a proactive agent in the learning process (e.g., Boekaerts, 1996; Zimmerman, 2002). Scholars have suggested that one of the most important learning objectives of primary school, the development of reading competences, may be affected by a child's level of proactivity (e.g., Horner & O'Connor, 2007). Yet, the role of personal initiative in early reading development has seldom been studied.

When children start learning to read at school, one of the major tasks is to develop fluent and accurate word reading skills. These skills represent an essential prerequisite for adequate text comprehension (e.g., Ouellette & Beers, 2010; Perfetti, 2007; Verhoeven & Van Leeuwe, 2008). Word reading comprises parallel coding processes that turn phonological, orthographic, and semantic information into correct word meaning (Kirby, Desrochers, Roth & Lai, 2008). During these processes,

children need to recognize words and simultaneously work out their meaning. As an indicator for word reading, we therefore focused on word comprehension which includes both of these processes (Lenhard & Schneider, 2006). Because word reading represents an important predictor of future reading comprehension, a vast amount of theoretical and empirical work conducted within the last 30 years has focused on identifying cognitive variables as intrapersonal predictors of word reading. For example, rapid automatized naming, vocabulary, and phonological awareness were found to be important predictors and were largely emphasized in theories of word reading (e.g., Hulme & Snowling, 2013; Kirby, Desrochers, Roth & Lai, 2008). At the same time, researchers also highlighted the fact that more general cognitive abilities, such as processing speed, enhance the progress in word reading (e.g., Christopher et al., 2012).

Another tradition of research has focused on motivational factors in reading development (e.g., Byrne, 2005). Learning and performance are thought to be intensified when children engage in intrinsically motivating activities that satisfy their need for self-determination (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). Therefore, one major determinant of becoming a good reader is believed to be a student's intrinsic reading motivation (e.g., Wigfield, 1997). In line with this, previous studies have supported a positive link between intrinsic reading motivation and word and text comprehension (e.g., Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Stutz, Schaffner, & Schiefele, 2016b).

One limitation of research to date, however, is that only few studies have looked at the intrapersonal predictors of word reading that went beyond cognitive abilities and intrinsic reading motivation. Yet, good readers are active readers who pursue self-set goals, actively plan their reading behavior, and persist when facing difficulties (e.g., Duke

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& Pearson, 2002). Therefore, from early on, children need to develop into self-starting and active problem solvers in order to foster their own reading development (Juel, 1991). They need to flexibly use strategies, abandon false assumptions, and remain persistent when encountering reading problems (e.g., Ehri & Snowling, 2004; Roberts, Christo & Shefelbine, 2011). Direct instruction is necessary but limited in helping them on this learning path, because the number of words in any given language is just too high for each word to be taught individually (Share, 1995). Therefore, it is likely that the development of word reading ability also benefits from a child's self-starting, proactive, and persistent nature.

The aim of the present study is therefore to examine the effects of academic personal initiative on the development of word comprehension over time. In order to demonstrate the unique contribution of PI beyond established predictors, we take the effects of cognitive and motivational predictors into account. To this end, we included previous word comprehension, intrinsic reading motivation, and a measure of general cognitive ability (i.e., processing speed) as control variables.

1.1. The role of academic personal initiative in word comprehension development

Academic personal initiative (API) is derived from the construct of *personal initiative*, which was developed within the work context (Frese & Fay, 2001; Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng & Tag, 1997). It represents a personal characteristic that is similar to other concepts of proactivity (Fay & Frese, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008) and manifests itself in self-starting, proactive, and persistent behaviors at school (Wollny et al., 2016). By showing API, students are not waiting for change to come, but actively anticipate, plan, and cause change themselves by pursuing self-set academic goals (self-starting behavior). In doing so, they adopt a long-term perspective and develop action plans that take future problems and possible opportunities into account (proactive behavior). Because the development of new academic skills is often associated with initial barriers, a high degree of API also entails actively approaching problems and persisting until the intended goal is achieved (persistent behavior).

With this definition, there is some overlap between the construct of API and the self-regulatory and motivational constructs examined so far, but differences exist too. For instance, both API and engagement lead students to show self-starting behavior in order to increase their learning outcomes (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand & Kindermann, 2008). At the same time, API is distinct from engagement, because engagement also includes a range of adaptive and responsive behaviors that are not proactive in nature (e.g., attendance, participation, following of classroom rules; Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Moreover, API is distinct from self-regulated learning, which is defined as a process that includes a wide range of domain-specific learning-oriented activities and strategies (e.g., self-monitoring, time management; Zimmerman, 2002). In contrast, API defines the general tendency to display such activities, and therefore constitutes an important prerequisite of self-regulated learning (Wollny et al., 2016; Zimmerman, 1990). Finally, API is distinct from incremental theories of intelligence (beliefs that intelligence is malleable) and related motivational variables, such as self-efficacy or mastery orientation. These variables refer to the driving force behind learning-oriented behavior and should thus positively affect API. However, they also relate to more general, task-oriented, and reactive behaviors that do not equate with proactive behavior (e.g., Caraway, Tucker, Reinke & Hall, 2003; Lam, Wong, Yang & Liu, 2012; Ommundsen, Haugen & Lund, 2005).

In adults, personal initiative and closely related constructs show a positive relationship with a preference for challenging tasks and learning opportunities, self-reliant work in training situations, and academic achievement (e.g., Fay & Frese, 2001; Sonnentag, 2003). Therefore, it seems likely that personal initiative also contributes to learning processes in children. In particular, the construct includes those proactive

behaviors in self-regulated learning that are attributed to good and active readers (i.e., goal-setting, planning, and problem-solving activities; e.g., Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). In the process of becoming fluent readers, children tend to perceive reading as a problem-solving activity and demonstrate—without external instruction—a range of active strategic behaviors (e.g., Brenna, 1995; Juliebö, Malicky, & Norman, 1998; Martin & Kragler, 2011). They monitor their understanding, recognize their reading errors, and thus correct themselves while reading. When word comprehension is challenged, they sound out or reread, use analogies and synonyms, or use additional information to decipher meaning. However, children tend to differ in the degree to which they display this active behavior (e.g., Martin & Kragler, 2011).

Because children who score higher on API are self-starting, we propose that they display more strategic behaviors in order to support their own understanding. Furthermore, we assume that they rely less on instructions from teachers and parents and take responsibility for their own reading progress. When faced with reading difficulties, they likely seek out efficient solutions and persist until comprehension is repaired. Moreover, because they are highly proactive, we assume that they understand reading as an outstanding opportunity to acquire new knowledge. Therefore, children ranking higher on API presumably prefer more challenging texts and are more enthusiastic in comprehending the world through text in general.

However, word reading development has thus far been primarily examined with respect to re-active rather than proactive self-regulatory skills (e.g., Gestsdottir et al., 2014; McClelland, Acock, Piccinin, Rhea & Stallings, 2013). To advance the research on personal initiative in children, Wollny et al. (2016) recently developed and validated a teacher-rated measure of API in a large sample of German children and adolescents. The authors found positive associations between API and academic self-efficacy, learning goal orientation, and school performance. Wollny (2015) further showed that children scoring higher on personal initiative displayed more active reading behaviors and had a higher vocabulary knowledge. Despite these promising results, the question remained to what extent API plays a role in word reading development, particularly when examined simultaneously with measures of general mental ability and conceptually close motivational variables.

1.2. Basic cognitive ability as concurrent predictor

Personal initiative shows a positive relationship to mental ability in children and adults (Tornau & Frese, 2013, 2015; Wollny et al., 2016). More specifically, API has demonstrated a positive relationship to processing speed in a sample of children and adolescents (see Study 2 in Wollny et al., 2016). Processing speed represents an indicator for general intelligence and refers to the ability to quickly process and automatize mental operations (e.g., McBride-Chang & Kail, 2002). Moreover, processing speed functions as a positive predictor of word reading achievement and several of its antecedents (e.g., Christopher et al., 2012; Cutting & Denckla, 2001). This goes along with the assumption that processing speed underlies the growing automatization of word reading development and therefore frees up mental capacities for higher cognitive processes (e.g., Kail, Hall, & Caskey, 1999). Thus, children with higher processing speed likely have more mental capacity available to show API during reading. Therefore, it is a relevant question whether API explains unique variance in word comprehension gains above and beyond indicators of general ability, such as processing speed.

1.3. Intrinsic reading motivation as concurrent predictor

Intrinsic motivation causes self-starting behavior, shares antecedents with personal initiative (e.g., internal locus of control, autonomy), and is related to self-regulated learning and autonomous behavior (e.g., Deci et al., 1991; Fay & Frese, 2000). Thus, the construct is conceptually close to that of API. This raises the question to what extent API

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