

Differential Pattern of Longitudinal Reading Comprehension Predictors in Children with German as First or Second Language

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Abstract

Objectives: Children who are literate in a second language often have a performance disadvantage in reading compared to their monolingual peers, a pattern consistently reported in large-scale assessments such as PISA and PIRLS in German-speaking countries. The reasons are manifold, including reduced exposure to the language of schooling and limited home literacy resources. The promotion of reading is thus largely the responsibility of educational institutions. This study aims to identify which aspects of vocabulary knowledge are most strongly associated with reading development and might therefore be promising targets for educational intervention.

Methodology: The study followed 382 children from Grade 2 to Grade 4, 199 of whom had German as a second language. Reading comprehension at the word, sentence, and text level, as well as vocabulary breadth and relational, formal, and semantic word knowledge (vocabulary depth), were assessed at three time points. Latent growth curve models were used to examine developmental trajectories and to compare the pattern of predictors for children with German as a first versus a second language.

Results: Second-language learners did not show the same pattern of predictors as first-language learners across the three years. At all measurement points and across development, vocabulary variables—especially vocabulary depth—had a predominantly negative and generally stronger association with reading outcomes in bilingual children than in their monolingual peers. This differential effect increased with task complexity, from word to sentence to text reading, over the measurement period.

Discussion: The findings indicate that vocabulary depth is a particularly sensitive bottleneck for the development of reading comprehension in children with German as a second language, especially when tasks place higher demands on integrating semantic relations in context. For language education, this suggests that expanding vocabulary breadth may be insufficient. Instead, instruction needs to emphasize explicit work on semantic networks, relational word knowledge, and morpho-semantic structure within meaningful reading activities. In classes – particularly in those with a high proportion of bilingual learners – school materials and assessment tools must systematically incorporate tasks that promote a deeper understanding of words (e.g., word families) alongside decoding and general comprehension strategies. The differential pattern of predictors also underscores the importance of early, sustained language support, rather than short-term add-on programs, to reduce the reading disadvantages documented for bilingual students in German-speaking systems. Taken together, the results argue for targeted language education policies and teacher training that integrate vocabulary depth as a core component of reading instruction for linguistically diverse classrooms.