

Reading Competence and Reading Self-Concept in Primary School: The Roles of Language Background and Gender

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Abstract

Objectives: One of the key skills that predicts academic achievement is reading competence, with its development beginning in primary school. At this early stage, disparities have been observed between children whose first language is the language of instruction (L1) and children who acquire it as an additional language (L2). Several cognitive, educational, environmental, social, and behavioral factors, have been identified as influential on reading performance, among these, the reading self-concept, defined as the subjective perception of one's own reading abilities. The present study is based on data collected as part of a larger research project (Lesen in der Zweitsprache Deutsch (LiZD) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), project number 212832) and examines the relationship between reading competence and reading self-concept in third-grade children, focusing in particular on the influence of first language and gender.

Methodology: The sample is composed of N = 156 girls, of whom N = 77 have German as their first language (L1), and N = 79 have German as their second language (L2), and N = 157 boys, of whom N = 72 have German as their first language (L1), and N = 85 have German as their second language (L2). Reading self-concept was assessed using a standardized self-concept scale, and reading competence was operationalized through reading comprehension. Additionally, reading fluency and vocabulary measures were conducted. Analyses included group comparisons, correlation analyses, regression models, and longitudinal analyses.

Results: Analyses of variance (ANOVA) demonstrated that L1 children reported higher reading self-concept than L2 children, and scored significantly higher in the reading comprehension test, while no significant overall gender difference was identified. However, correlation analyses revealed that the correlation strength between reading self-concept and reading comprehension was stronger in L1 children in comparison to L2 children, thus demonstrating a significantly higher level of accuracy in their reading self-concept assessment. By contrast, L2 children exhibited lower levels of accuracy, with the lowest levels observed among L2 girls, suggesting that they may be a particularly vulnerable group. Reading comprehension was found to be a significant predictor of reading self-concept, whereas the socioeconomic status, gender, and their interaction with language background did not explain additional variance once reading performance was considered. Longitudinal analyses further suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship between reading performance and reading self-concept.

Discussion: These findings highlight the importance of incorporating reading self-concept into the development of reading competence, particularly in relation to language background and gender. It is hypothesized that lower reading competence and lower reading self-concept scores, particularly if one's reading self-concept is incongruent, may mutually reinforce each other over time. This phenomenon may be especially relevant for L2 children, and, more specifically, for L2 girls. The necessity for early, targeted support that addresses both reading skills and the reading self-concept is thus emphasized.