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# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ELEMENTS OF READING LITERACY IN STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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## Abstract

The ultimate criterion of reading literacy is reading comprehension. In order for the reader to comprehend what he or she is reading, the reader must have a positive attitude toward reading. The reader must understand the content of the text and the reading process itself. Reading technique must be automated, and the reader must understand and use various reading strategies. In this paper, we present the relationship between reading fluency, reading anxiety, reading comprehension, and reading learning strategies before and after the implementation of the metacognitive reading strategies instructional program. The program involved 9 students with learning difficulties from 5th grade elementary school. We find a statistically significant negative correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension before the implementation of the program. There is also a tendency for positive correlation between knowledge of metacognitive reading strategies and reading comprehension, but due to the insufficient number of students involved, we were unable to prove statistical significance. The correlations of other elements of reading literacy differ from what would be expected based on the results of previous research with neurotypical students, so we emphasize the importance of reading literacy research with students with learning difficulties.

**Keywords:** learning difficulties, reading anxiety, reading comprehension, reading fluency, reading learning strategies.

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## **Introduction**

Reading literacy is the ability to understand and use those written forms of language that are necessary for functioning in society and/or important to the individual (Elley, Gradišar, & Lapajne, 1995). The goal of modern reading instruction is for students to read fluently, understand what they read, and be able to use the information they read to solve learning and life problems and for personal growth. They are also able to use different reading techniques flexibly, depending on the type of reading material and the goal of reading (Pečjak & Gradišar, 2002). In the educational system, the main goal we want to achieve with reading is to turn reading activities into a constant and desired habit (Baki, 2017). Reading should be a benefit and a pleasure. More modern researchers, following advances in neuroscience, are aware that reading pleasure also depends on emotional variables that influence the reading process, such as attitude, interest, motivation, self-efficacy, and anxiety (Baki, 2017).

Pečjak (2010) divides the elements essential for the development of reading literacy into a group of (meta-)cognitive elements and a group of motivational elements. The (meta-)cognitive factors of reading literacy include phonological awareness and decoding, and related to this, automatic word recognition, vocabulary, and strategic reading with knowledge and use of reading strategies. Reading comprehension emerges as the ultimate criterion of reading literacy.

The first stage of literacy, that is, the literacy stage in the strict sense, involves the acquisition of reading fluency. It includes the development of pre-reading and pre-writing skills, the acquisition and automation of reading techniques (Pečjak & Gradišar, 2002). In the second stage, the literacy stage in the broadest sense of the word, the student is able to learn by reading and to read different types of material fluently and with comprehension (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Pečjak & Gradišar, 2002). In addition to reading comprehension fluency, this stage also includes knowledge and use of various reading strategies, which are an important part of learning strategies needed for independent knowledge acquisition later in school and in life in general (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Pečjak & Gradišar, 2002). According to Marentič Požarnik (2000), learning strategies are a sequence or combination of purposeful learning activities that an individual uses on his or her own initiative and changes according to the demands of the situation. Pečjak (2010) adds that the reading learning strategy is a sequence of steps that lead the student to the goal, i.e., learning from printed sources. However, reading with comprehension is crucial for this.

Many authors (Dongil et al., 2008, in Pečjak, 2013; Guthrie et al., 2004, cited in Pečjak, 2013) divide reading learning strategies into:

- *Cognitive strategies* that are primarily aimed at memorizing learning material. These include repetition strategies, elaboration strategies, and organization strategies.
- *Metacognitive strategies* that aim to consciously monitor, control, and direct the learning process.
- *Motivational strategies* that aim at maintaining the student's willingness to learn and persevere in the learning process. It depends on them whether the student uses the above strategies in learning as they require more time and effort from him. Motivational strategies also serve to relieve various emotional tensions (including reading anxiety) that generally reduce the effectiveness of learning.

The risk of developing learning and reading anxiety in students is higher in the presence of general and specific learning difficulties (Hribar & Magajna, 2011). Zbornik (1988) defined reading anxiety as a specific phobia of a situational type directed towards reading. It could also be defined as "fear of reading" (Piccolo et al., 2017; Wassermann, 2004). Melanlioğlu (2014a) defined reading anxiety as a reaction directed towards reading. Reading anxiety is one of the components that hinder the process of transforming reading skills into a habit. The cause of reading anxiety is reading problems that the individual has experienced in the past (Zbornika, 1988). However, it can also be caused by a lack of reading fluency at the beginning of the reading learning phase, poor reading speed, or problems with reading correctly (Çeliktürk & Yamaç, 2015). Reading anxiety can occur when students think that their reading will be graded, but it can also be caused by the material itself that they have to read (Melanlioğlu, 2014a). It often occurs when students encounter a text they did not know before. It increases when the number of words the reader does not know increases or when the reader draws wrong conclusions about the text (ibid.). Reading anxiety is also defined by some authors (Armstrong & Rentz, 2002; Chen, 2019; Melanlioğlu, 2014b) as a result of lack of motivation because students cannot remember what they have read.

Reading anxiety prevents students from understanding what they read by limiting their cognitive abilities such as reasoning, questioning, and evaluating (Baki, 2017). By affecting the cognitive system, anxiety prevents the student from understanding and remembering important points in the text (Baki, 2017; Melanlioğlu, 2014b). This decreases reading motivation (Baki, 2017; Downing &

Leong, 1982; Lawrence, 2007) and leads to a decrease in attention to reading and the student avoids reading activities (Baki, 2017; Çeliktürk & Yamaç, 2015; Murray & Janelle, 2003).

### **Methodology**

A multidimensional approach to reading development emphasizes the interaction among genetic, biological, environmental, cognitive, and emotional factors that explain learning difficulties and differences among individuals with reading difficulties (Fletcher et al., 2007, cited in Piccolo et al., 2017; McGrath et al., 2011, cited in Piccolo et al., 2017). Numerous studies have found a positive relationship between metacognitive strategies and reading comprehension (Degennaro, 2018; Kolić-Vehovec, & Bajšanski, 2006; Melanlioğlu, 2014b; Zhussupova, & Kazbekova, 2016). Research by Veenman, Kerseboom, & Imthorn (2000) shows that anxious students are less likely to activate metacognitive skills, monitor their own activity to a lesser extent, and use various systematic strategies less frequently. Melanlioğlu (2014b) found in her study that the level of reading anxiety in students who participated in an 8-week program to teach metacognitive strategies was statistically significantly lower after the program was completed than before the program began. Also, at the end of the program, reading anxiety was statistically significantly lower in students who had participated in the program than in the control group who had not participated in the program.

### **Aim and goal**

In this paper, we present the results of a study in which we investigated the relationship between reading fluency, reading anxiety, reading comprehension, and reading learning strategies in students with learning difficulties. Students participated in a program to develop metacognitive reading strategies and improve metacognitive control and self-regulation, adapted from Melanlioğlu's (2014b) program, which she developed to assess students' level of reading anxiety while teaching metacognitive reading strategies.

### **Sample**

The study included five male and four female students with learning difficulties attending the 5th grade of primary school in two Slovenian primary schools. All students were enrolled in the reading learning strategies program.

### **The structure of the reading learning strategies program**

The reading learning strategies program consisted of eight sessions of one school hour each, held twice a week outside of class.

Before and after the reading learning strategies program, students were assessed for reading fluency, reading anxiety, reading comprehension, and reading learning strategies.

Each session was structured in the same way. The teacher who led the reading learning strategies program taught and discussed with the students one of the metacognitive strategies that author Melanlioğlu (2014b) divided into three categories according to their use before, during, and after reading:

- *Pre-reading strategies*: setting a reading goal, applying prior knowledge, evaluating and planning the reading process.
- *Strategies during reading*: identifying appropriate strategies, reading techniques, and planning the path we will take when we encounter problems.
- *Post-reading strategies*: evaluating and sharing evaluation with others.

The teacher who led the reading learning strategies program acted as a role model in teaching reading strategies. He used metacognitive language to verbalize his thoughts and the questions he asked himself while reading the text. In this way, students found it easier to follow and memorize the metacognitive reading strategies. Prior to reading the text, the teacher asked students what they already knew about the text so that students would be aware of the importance of recalling prior knowledge for understanding and memorising the material. As part of the discussion of each metacognitive reading strategy, the teacher suggested that students use a cognitive strategy and a graphic representation that was appropriate to the nature of the text. It is important that the teacher teaches the metacognitive reading strategies and gives students the opportunity to use them independently. Only in this way will students later be able to master challenging reading tasks.

In the introductory, first part of each session, students reviewed the reading strategies they had learned in previous lessons in such a way that one of the students demonstrated the reading strategies by asking and answering questions. At the beginning of the main part of the session, the teacher introduced the new reading strategy and wrote it on the board in the form of a self-questionnaire. Each of the students wrote it down in their checklist to focus on planning, monitoring their reading, and evaluating what they read.

In the main, second part of each session, the steps of teaching each metacognitive strategy followed (Bonds, Bonds, & Peach, 1992):

1. describing the strategy,
2. demonstrating the strategy, modelling the teaching of the strategy,
3. guiding and monitoring students as they performed the activities,
4. providing feedback to students and encouraging other students to provide feedback to each other.

In each session, students learned a new reading strategy, and practised all previously learned strategies on selected texts. The difficulty level of the texts increased.

In the last part, the teacher demonstrated again the use of the strategy discussed in the session (or asked a question), and the students repeated all the strategies discussed up to that point.

Three work forms were used in the reading learning strategies program:

- *the frontal work form* in the introductory part, in the first two steps of the main part (when the explanation and demonstration of the strategy took place), and in the final part,
- *individual work form* in the third step of the teaching strategy (when students work independently with the text),
- *pair work* in the fourth step of the teaching strategy (when they exchanged feedback in pairs).

The working methods in the reading learning strategies program were similar to those used by author Melanlioğlu (2014b) in her strategy teaching program. We changed them according to how much responsibility the students took in implementing the strategy themselves and how much the teacher took. In the first sessions, the frontal form of instruction predominated over time, while in the last, eighth session, students' individual work completely prevailed. As students became more independent in implementing the strategies, the teacher's responsibility decreased while the students' responsibility increased, which is consistent with the model of gradual reduction of teaching responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983, cited in Pečjak & Gradišar, 2002).

The steps of teaching metacognitive reading strategies (Bonds et al., 1992) also dictated the choice of working methods, namely:

- Through the method of explaining and discussing, the teacher described the strategy discussed in the introduction – the first step.
- The second step in teaching reading strategies involves the method of demonstration and model teaching of the strategy.

- The third step involved the method of working with the text when the program guides and monitors students as they perform the activities and when students read the text.
- In the last, fourth step of teaching the strategy, the teacher gave feedback to the students and encouraged them to give feedback to each other through the interview method.

## **Methods**

The degree and direction of the relationship between reading fluency, reading comprehension, reading anxiety, and knowledge of reading learning strategies before and after the reading learning strategies program was determined using the correlation coefficient, the nonparametric Spearman test, or the Pearson correlation coefficient.

## **Research Instrument**

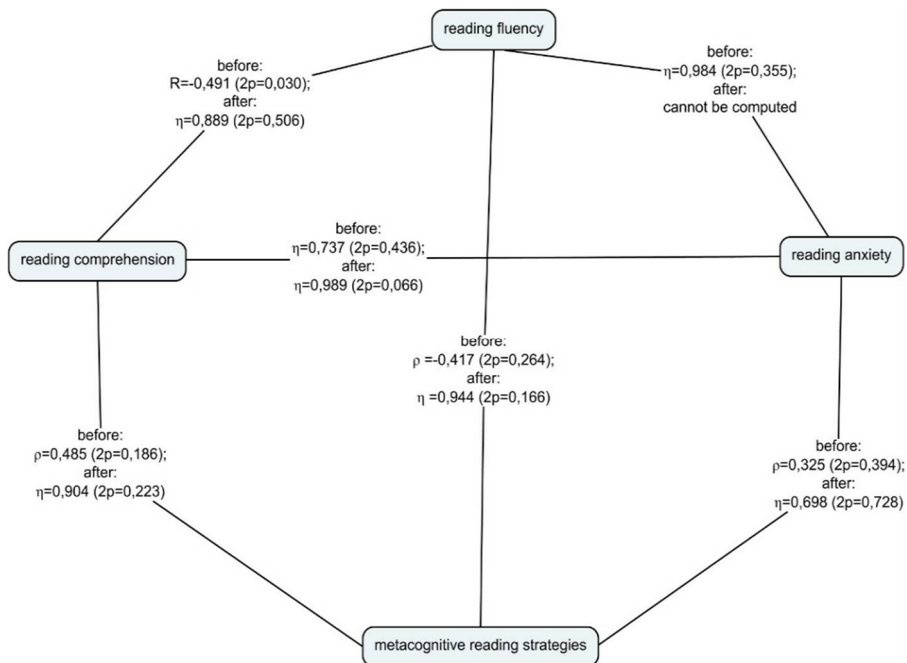
Before and after implementing the reading learning strategies program, the following tests were administered to all participating students in the same manner:

- Reading fluency level in reading aloud was assessed using the *Ptica in slon* (Eng. Bird and Elephant) reading aloud test (text from the 1991 International Literacy Survey (Elley et al., 1995)) and the Timed reading test and Non word reading test from the Special Needs Assessment Profile – SNAP by Weedon and Reid (2018).
- The level of reading comprehension was determined with the *Ptica in slon* reading aloud test and with the reading comprehension test *Noben pes ni zadosti* (Eng. No dog is enough), which is part of a test that was also used in an international study of reading literacy (Elley et al., 1995).
- The level of reading anxiety was determined using the Reading Anxiety Rating Scale, which was translated and adapted for use in Slovenia with the permission of the authors Çeliktürk and Yamaç (2015).
- The level of knowledge of reading strategies was determined using a questionnaire to identify metacognitive strategies for younger students (The Metacognitive Interview Form for Younger Students, NCREL, 1995, in Košak Babuder, 2012; 2016).

## Results and discussion

After the reading learning strategies program, students demonstrated statistically significantly higher knowledge of metacognitive reading strategies, as revealed by a nonparametric Wilcoxon test ( $Z = 2.527$ ;  $p = 0.006$ ). Using the dependent samples t-test, it was found that there was also a statistically significant difference in reading speed before ( $M = 120$ ;  $SD = 43.25$ ) and after ( $M = 139.66$ ;  $SD = 48.72$ ) the reading learning strategies program ( $t = 2.433$ ;  $df = 8$ ;  $p = 0.0205$ ). There were no statistically significant differences in the level of reading anxiety and reading comprehension before and after the reading learning strategies program. Diagram 1 shows the degree of correlation between each variable.

Diagram 1: Degree and direction of correlation between variables.



We find that the only statistically significant relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension is prior to the implementation of a reading learning strategies program. The relationship is negative and moderately strong, which is inconsistent with research indicating that reading speed has a significant positive impact on reading comprehension (Kim, Quinn, & Petscher, 2021;

O'Connor, Swanson, & Geraghty, 2010; Skinner et al., 2009; Yamaç, & Çeliktürk Sezgin, 2018). However, Pikulski and Chard (2005) point out that reading fluency alone is not sufficient to comprehend what is read, but is only a prerequisite.

Our study included students with learning difficulties, which have a significant impact on the acquisition of reading skills. Indeed, both lower-order skills (decoding words and phonological processes) and higher-order skills (reasoning and synthesizing, monitoring, comprehending, and knowing about the text) are important for reading comprehension (Kořak Babuder, 2012). When the reader has an automated reading technique, he fills the capacity of working memory with the meaning of what he reads, while the reader with deficits in the area of automation of reading technique scatters his attention between these processes – decoding and reading comprehension. As the attention of poorer readers is more focused on the first process, not enough capacity of working memory is left to attend to the meaning of what is read (Kim, 2015; Kim, Quinn, & Petscher, 2021; Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Rasinski, 2012; Yamaç & Çeliktürk Sezgin, 2018).

There is also a positive but statistically insignificant relationship between reading fluency and reading anxiety, which contradicts the findings of researchers Yamaç and Çeliktürk Sezgin (2018). The authors report that reading fluency has an effect on reducing reading anxiety in fourth graders. Students are able to read the text with accurate, appropriate speed and prosody as they experience fewer anxiety-specific signs (Yamaç & Çeliktürk Sezgin, 2018). Çeliktürk and Yamaç (2015) state that one of the causes of reading anxiety can also be a lack of reading fluency at the beginning of the reading learning process, a lack of prosody at the initial stage of reading comprehension, and poor reading speed or problems in reading correctly.

We found a positive but not statistically significant relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension. Our results contradict the findings of a study by authors Kuşdemir and Katrancı (2016), according to which there is a negative but important relationship between reading anxiety and reading comprehension. In research, the most common relationships between reading anxiety and reading comprehension are found through studies on the effect between reading achievement and the experience of reading enjoyment. These report that students with more positive attitudes toward reading have better reading comprehension than other

students (Kush, Watkins, & Brookhart, 2005; Martinez, Aricak, & Jewell, 2008).

There was a negative, moderate relationship between reading fluency and knowledge of metacognitive reading strategies before the reading learning strategies program and a very strong, positive relationship after the program. In both cases, the relationship was not statistically significant. We did not find any research that established a relationship between the above variables. We can conclude that it is an indirect relationship with reading comprehension as an intermediary.

The relationship between knowledge of metacognitive reading strategies and reading comprehension is positive, but not statistically significant, both before and after the reading learning strategies program. One might assume that self-regulatory knowledge and skills facilitate learning and that there is a relationship with better learning performance, in our case with better reading comprehension, but the results in this area are not consistent. Studies have shown that self-regulatory aspects of learning are positively related to learning success and task solving performance (Puklek Levpušček, 2001; Zimmerman, & Schunk, 2011; Tomec, Pečjak, & Peklaj, 2006). Küçükoğlu (2013) also confirms that students improve their reading comprehension when they analyse which strategy they use and how it helps them determine the meaning of the text. However, Gil-Garcia and Canizales (2001) point out that the metacognitive strategies we teach before, during, and after reading have effects on organizational skills in addition to effects on reading comprehension. Yamaç and Çeliktürk Sezgin (2018) cite metacognitive monitoring as a predictor of reading comprehension.

Other studies have found no relationship between (meta-)cognitive components and learning outcomes or a negative relationship (Pečjak & Košir, 2003; Peklaj & Pečjak, 2001; Pressley & Ghatala, 1990; Rao, Moerly, & Sachs, 2000; Sperling et al., 2004, in Tomec et al., 2006). One of the explanations for the negative influence of metacognitive control/self-regulation on learning success is primarily when students are first exposed to new learning material. At this point, the focus is on learning strategies rather than metacognitive control of one's learning process (Černe & Juriševič, 2018). This is especially true for less successful students who have less knowledge. Therefore, they must first acquire specific strategies of a learning domain before they can acquire the skills of metacognitive awareness (ibid.).

We also find a positive, statistically non-significant relationship between knowledge of metacognitive reading strategies and reading anxiety. The latter contradicts the results of Melanlioğlu's (2014b) study, which found a negative relationship between reading anxiety and metacognitive reading strategies. No other studies were found that established a relationship between reading anxiety and knowledge of metacognitive reading strategies. We did find some research that examined the impact of metacognition on other types of mental health problems. A positive relationship was found between poor metacognition and generalized anxiety, social phobia (Wells & Carter, 2001), obsessive-compulsive symptoms (Myers, Fisher, & Wells, 2008), pathological anxiety (Papageorgiou & Wells, 2003), and post-traumatic stress disorder (Roussis & Wells, 2006). A relationship between metacognition and test anxiety (Veenman et al., 2000) and a relationship between metacognition and stress perception (Spada, Nikčević, Moneta, & Wells, 2008) have also been found. Inadequately developed metacognition may therefore contribute to the occurrence of anxiety and other mental disorders (Dragan, Dragan, Kononowicz, & Wells, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

This paper presents the relationship between reading fluency, reading anxiety, reading comprehension, and reading learning strategies. The study included 9 students with learning difficulties who participated in the reading learning strategies program. Data were collected before and after the implementation of the program. We found a statistically significant relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension before the implementation of the program. This was negative and moderate ( $R = -0.0491$ ;  $2p = 0.030$ ). Apart from the small number of students included in the study, the result is also influenced by the fact that all the students included in the study have learning difficulties that significantly affect both lower and upper order reading skills. In reviewing the research, we did not come across any study that included only students with learning difficulties, so we suggest that research in this area continues in the future. Understanding the interrelationships between the elements of reading literacy in learners with learning difficulties will help to develop a program that systematically addresses weaknesses in information processing and provides compensatory strategies for improved reading comprehension as the ultimate criterion of reading literacy.

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