First language predictors of second language comprehension in different modalities

What this research was about and why it is important

First language (L1) skills are important foundations for learning additional languages. They also play a significant role in how children, particularly at the early stages of acquiring another language, comprehend texts. The L1 predictors of second language (L2) reading performance have been thoroughly investigated in previous research. However, with the wide-spread use of modern technological devices that allow for multi-modal language processing, such as listening to a text while simultaneously reading it, it is necessary to examine an extended range of language comprehension processes. Understanding the role of L1 skills in instructed L2 language learning contexts is important because it can help us to predict whether children who have L1 literacy-related difficulties in early primary education will face challenges in learning an additional language.

What the researchers did

- Forty-seven young Slovenian language learners with an official diagnosis of dyslexia and 233 Slovenian children with no certified learning difficulties participated in this study. The students were aged between 11 and 12, and were approximately at A2 level of proficiency in English on the Common European Framework of Reference.
- The participants completed four comprehension tasks from a test bank of Slovenian National English Tests for Year 6 students.
- The students read two texts, listened to one text, and read one text while listening to the recorded version of the text. Participants had to answer six short-answer comprehension questions.
- Four sub-tests from the Slovenian version of the Special Needs Assessment Profile were also administered: timed word-reading, non-word reading and dictation tasks and a test of phonological awareness, where children had to delete specific sounds in words.

What the researchers found

- In their Slovenian L1 dyslexic children performed significantly worse than their non-dyslexic peers in word-level skills.
- A considerable proportion of students with weak L2 reading and listening skills was not identified as having dyslexia.
- Non-dyslexic children’s text comprehension was better in all modalities than those of children with no dyslexia, but the size of difference was the smallest in the reading-while-listening condition.
- Students’ L2 reading scores were strongly related to how accurately they performed in the timed word and non-word reading tasks.
- Students who scored higher in the timed word reading and dictation tasks performed better in L2 listening.
- How well students did on the dictation task was related to how well they understood a text in the reading-while-listening condition.

Things to consider

- Word-level L1 skills might serve as useful predictors of dyslexic type learning difficulties.
- The accuracy and speed of word and non-word reading in L1 can be indicators of potential L2 reading difficulties of young learners.
- L1 dictation tests might give diagnostic information on young L2 learners’ L2 listening and reading-while listening problems.
- The study needs to be replicated with older learners from other language backgrounds and using more complex reading tasks.


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