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## **Recreating Home Literacy in the Classroom: Emergent L2 Reading in Young Greek Learners of English**

### **Abstract**

Children begin school having already acquired a wide range of skills related to oral language, phonological awareness, print conventions, and letter knowledge. These emergent skills are closely associated with children's home literacy-related experiences and are strong precursors of L1 reading development. This experimental research examined whether this participation in literacy events can support second language acquisition to prepare young learners of English for L2 literacy and reading development. It involved two groups of nine seven-year-old learners each: a control group and an experimental group. The experimental group was exposed to carefully selected English print storybooks, chosen for their potential to foster literacy skills, in a home-like environment without formal L2 instruction. The study's methodology compared the development of emergent skills and L2 reading ability across both groups. Despite varied reading outcomes, all participants in the experimental group developed significant emergent subskills, foundational to reading and beneficial for L2 development and cognitive growth. These results underline the importance of integrating rich English print materials into early L2 learning environments, offering practical insights for educators to enhance young learners' literacy and reading skills.

*Keywords:* emergent literacy skills, second language acquisition, young learners of English, Home Literacy Environment (HLE), informal literacy activities, shared reading

Today, there is a consensus that literacy development begins very early in a child's life, well before children start school and receive formal instruction (Adams, 1990; Sénéchal et al., 2001). Home is the first setting where children

have the opportunity to observe, explore, and participate in literacy events. These interactions are recognised as having a positive impact on children's development and partly account for the individual differences observed at school entry. Home literacy activities have been found to be significantly associated with improved school literacy performance (Alston-Abel & Berninger, 2018). Informal literacy activities, especially shared reading at home, seem to be more strongly connected with development of general oral language skills, such as vocabulary acquisition. This, in turn, indirectly supports the later development of reading comprehension skills (Hamilton et al., 2016).

There are considerable variations in the rate at which children acquire reading skills. Research consistently shows that active participation in literacy events, which usually take the form of reading stories, singing songs or even learning the alphabet, is strongly related to vocabulary growth and general language development in children (Chan & Sylva, 2015). In addition, reading books is considered the most critical activity for building the foundational knowledge necessary for future achievement in acquiring basic language skills and understanding metaphors (Caesar & Nelson, 2014). Specifically, Chan and Sylva indicate that the "key cognitive-linguistic strands that must be coordinated when learning to read are quite firmly in place before primary school" (p. 7). Therefore, the development of these skills is deemed critical. Children lacking these skills at school entry may need to exert greater effort to succeed in reading.

The home literacy environment (HLE) significantly influences the development of children's language skills. While the impact of HLE on the development of children's primary language is well-documented, its role in facilitating the acquisition of a second language in children remains less explored (Dong & Chow, 2022). In the context of second language learning, such holistic approaches to initiate literacy development at the first stages of introducing L2 to young learners (YLS) are not common. However, Yeung and King (2016) specifically address the home literacy environment and its effect on English language and literacy skills; their study evidenced that shared reading at home is a key practice that helps young Chinese ESL kindergarten children improve their English vocabulary, awareness of syllables, and ability to read words. Multiple aspects of HLE, such as shared book reading activities (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), parental direct instruction on print concepts (Burgess et al., 2002), and access to literacy resources (Johnson et al., 2008), have been shown to significantly enhance the development of oral language and literacy skills in young children.

In second language acquisition, a learner usually goes through a stage of formal instruction in a context-reduced setting when letter knowledge and word decoding are targeted. Traditional L2 literacy instruction divides the reading process into distinct components, such as: letter identification, letter-sound associations, and sight word recognition, allowing for systematic development of early literacy skills. The present study examines young learners' second

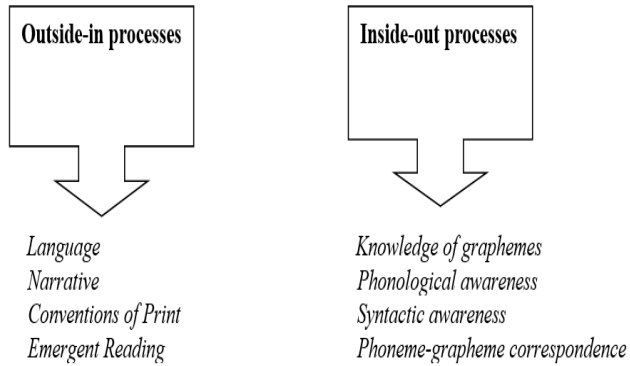
language development through their exposure to rich English print materials and participation in meaningful, literacy events in a context-embedded setting while focusing on the importance of foundational, emergent skills. No formal L2 instruction is involved, participants are exposed to a curated selection of enriched English-language storybooks. It implements and evaluates the application of this overlooked, yet critical, emergent stage to second language acquisition. Emergent literacy is considered to be an integral part of the process of becoming literate in L1 and is now being examined as an equally important component of L2 reading development.

## Theoretical Framework

The term emergent literacy (EL) was first conceived by Marie Clay (1967), who used it to describe the earliest behaviour and concepts young children employ in interacting with books even before the onset of formal teaching at schools. Clay perceived reading and writing as two cognitive processes that develop concurrently, with no need for reading to precede writing.

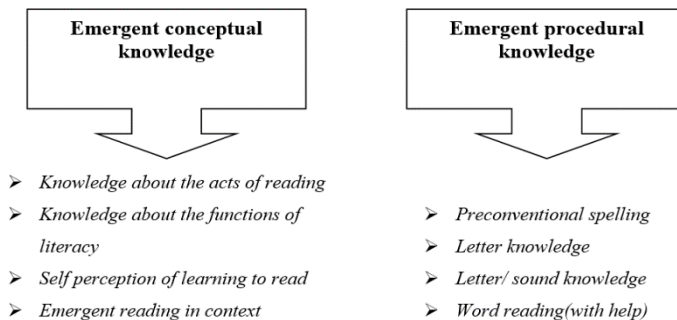
A central belief of EL theory is that the four language skills are all inter-related. Any progress that is recorded in one skill is bound to have a positive effect on the others (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). The interactive nature of skills encourages a holistic view of language and the realisation of the fact that focusing on one discrete skill will also affect others. Another aspect of the theory is that it starts at birth and continues until the child starts formal schooling. On this basis, the family environment assumes a critical role in the development of these skills. Literacy-rich home environments are conducive to literacy growth. Even though various factors are at play for a child's literacy development, the family environment is related closely to early literacy skills development (Morrow, 2001). Burgess et al. (2002) suggest that the HLE has a potentially robust influence on oral language, phonological awareness, and word decoding ability, arguing that further attention should be paid to the manner it is conceptualised.

According to Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), "the term 'emergent literacy' is used to denote the idea that the acquisition of literacy is best conceptualised as a developmental continuum, with its origins early in the life of a child, rather than as an all-or-none phenomenon that begins when children start school" (p. 848). They propose that two sets of skills are used by children: *outside-in* processes which include knowledge about print, narratives, and language, and *inside-out* processes which include letter recognition, letter-sound association, and phonological awareness.

**Figure 1***Emergent Literacy Components (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998)*

Outside-in processes are related to a child's ability to recognise the context of what they are trying to read and act accordingly, focusing on comprehension skills. Inside-out processes include low-level decoding skills of literacy starting with the ability to identify letters and associate sounds with their corresponding graphemes.

Sénéchal et al. (2001) introduce a similar distinction naming knowledge about the acts of literacy and functions of print as emergent conceptual knowledge and knowledge about letters, sounds, and words as emergent procedural knowledge (code-related skills). They propose an advanced model of EL, claiming that in this new alternative model, EL is separate from oral language and metalinguistic skills, both of which constitute two distinct constructs. Although there are some differences between the two models, the primary distinction between the components is similar.

**Figure 2***Emergent Literacy Components (Sénéchal et al., 2001)*

Children require all these components of knowledge to become successful readers. Research in this field demonstrates the importance of oral language, phonological awareness, print knowledge, and letter awareness as strong precursors of reading development (Goswami, 2003; Lonigan et al., 2000; Williams, 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). The following sections summarise each component to provide a comprehensive view of key emergent literacy skills.

## **Oral Language**

Oral language and literacy are both language-based skills. To put it simply, what is written and then read is oral language (Kamhi & Catts, 2002). Writing aspires to transcribe what is said orally, using various language systems, most of which rely on symbols developed to represent sounds in words. Well-developed oral language skills are a prerequisite for successful reading development. A poor vocabulary will affect young learners' ability to recognise words and comprehend what they read. Foorman et al. (2002) stressed the importance of oral language by placing it as a foundation for EL. They argue that "young children's vocabulary has an impact on decoding skills very early in the process of learning to read, but the explanatory mechanisms behind this relation have yet to be identified" (p. 175). They assume that oral language growth is laterally related to the enhancement of phonological sensitivity, another EL component.

Similarly, Rohde (2015) considers oral language crucial for EL development. Children with developed oral language have an advantage in acquiring literacy skills. She suggests that oral speech development should be targeted both implicitly and explicitly before formal schooling to ensure all children have equal opportunities for literacy success. The family environment can offer invaluable opportunities for children to develop enriched oral language, starting from infancy through infant-directed speech that promotes speech sound discrimination and word and clause recognition. When story readings begin, book-related discourse between adults and children, whether contextualised or decontextualised, is strongly associated with advanced vocabulary knowledge (Hindman et al., 2008).

## **Phonological Awareness**

"Phonological awareness is a child's ability to detect and manipulate the sounds of spoken language independent of the semantic properties of those sounds" (Goodrich et al., 2013, p. 414). Rhyme, syllable awareness, and phonemic awareness constitute phonological awareness (PA). This ability is acquired in stages, some of which may overlap. Therefore, children first start

by distinguishing similar and dissimilar words. After that, they move on to blending sounds and then to removing sounds from words. The ability to replace sounds with words comes last. Therefore, children begin with the larger units, those of words, and then they become sensitive to syllables and, finally, to phonemes. Awareness of phonemes is manifested approximately at the age of five. It is worth noticing that children develop sensitivity to syllables earlier than to onsets and rhymes (Foorman et al., 2002). However, these stages are not linear; they often overlap. Their sequence can also be altered by experiences or explicit instruction as in the case of phonemic awareness instruction.

PA has received considerable attention from researchers as it is considered to be a strong predictor of reading success (Adams, 1990). It is the first time that children move their attention from meaning to the sounds of words. This may not be easy for all learners as meaning makes sense to them and offers a purpose. They use words to communicate, unlike individual sounds that serve no apparent function. Focusing attention on the sounds of language is quite a different ability that is not happening automatically. Most children will not direct their attention to the sounds of words; meaning comes first (Rohde, 2015). They need to perceive the difference in the sounds words carry, which is a more cognitively demanding task. Book features and adult code-related talk can shift children's attention to the sounds of phonemes and help them develop this sensitivity.

## **Print Awareness**

Print awareness plays a significant role in developing literacy skills in young learners. Through print referencing during read-aloud activities children can enhance their foundational and emergent literacy skills at a faster rate (Justice & Ezell, 2004). An understanding of the relationship between speech sounds and printed symbols is critical for reading acquisition in the early stages of reading development (Lentsch, 2018). Generally speaking, print awareness refers to children's understanding of the conventions, forms, and functions of print (van Kleeck, 2006). More specifically, children gradually gain knowledge that print has a particular purpose: to convey meaning. Letters and words carry meaning and offer a new way of communication, independent of the immediate context. Specifically, children begin to realise that certain conventions apply to all forms of print. In most alphabetic languages, letters are written from left to right and top to bottom. Reading a book requires turning over to the next page. A sentence starts with a capital letter and ends with a period.

The forms of print are another component of equal importance that children need to acquire. Distinguishing letters from words, differentiating lowercase from uppercase letters, and realising that words are basic units of print are

concepts that need to be mastered. Print functions range from specific tasks like reading street signs to general applications such as following instructions (Gunn et al., 2000). While print awareness varies among children, there is consensus that children exposed to numerous literacy events develop this knowledge earlier and more extensively than those lacking such experience. Interventions that encourage parents and educators to engage in reading activities using environmental print and print-referencing approaches aim to enhance young learners' attention to printed text, supporting their literacy development (Piasta et al., 2012; Roy-Charland et al., 2015). Gettinger and Stoiber (2014) found that changes in educators' print-referencing techniques during whole-class book reading improved children's print-knowledge abilities. Liu et al. (2020) identified associations between print fixations—where children focus on written text while reading with adults—and print-related abilities, including orthographic awareness. Neumann et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between children's attention to environmental print and reading ability (RA). The researchers divided 36 children aged 3 to 5 into two groups (beginning readers and pre-readers) based on assessments of their alphabet knowledge and word-reading skills. Beginning readers showed faster attention to environmental print than pre-readers, suggesting that reading ability may influence children's attention to print.

### **Letter Recognition and Letter/Sound Association**

Developing awareness of letters and their corresponding sounds is essential for learning to read (Plewko et al., 2018). Like phonological awareness, this skill can develop formally or informally in young children. Knowledge of letter names is beneficial because these names provide information about grapheme sounds. Foorman et al. (2002) argue that learning letter names can be easier than learning letter sounds, possibly because letter names are unique. The authors further suggest that these processes are “reciprocally related” (p. 176) such that neither necessarily develops before the other. Typically, children learn letters before acquiring more complex phonological skills. To become successful readers, learners must acquire both letter knowledge and letter-sound correspondences.

Languages vary significantly as to how transparent they are to letter-sound relationships. The speed at which children learn letter-sound (LS) associations is influenced by the nature of the script, particularly its orthographic transparency, meaning how regular the letter-sound mappings are (Seymour et al., 2003). Children typically achieve proficiency in LS associations within one year of starting reading lessons in languages with transparent orthographies, facilitating a seamless transition to reading (Blomert & Vaessen, 2009). The Greek language (EL) has transparent orthography, while English has a more opaque

orthographic system. This difference raises important questions regarding how easily a reader whose L1 has a transparent orthography can develop an emergent reading skills in an L2 which is much less transparent. Specifically, for Greek learners of English as an L2, the adoption of strategies to navigate and decipher the less predictable rules of English is necessary. To become a successful reader in an emergent context with no overt instruction, the learner will have to transfer some of their knowledge regarding decoding and letter identification. Language transfer involves the tendency to transfer phonological, structural, and semantic features from the native language when learning a second language.

### **Language Transfer in Emergent Literacy**

In the present study, the primary focus is on Greek learners' ability to transfer basic emergent reading skills from Greek to English. Therefore, particular attention is given to encoding/decoding skills, as well as to some functional literacy abilities that readers acquire. According to Roberts (1994), these low-level skills are transferable and studies conducted in bilingual education programmes concluded that even in immersion contexts, learners fare better when they are literate in their first language rather than when they receive instruction only in L2. As it seems, learners already literate in their first language seem to have a benefit in learning to read in L2.

To account for the transfer of early literacy skills, Cummins (1979) introduced the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (DIH). Conceptual knowledge about the functions of literacy and procedural knowledge which includes letter recognition and letter/sound associations can be transferred as long as there is adequate exposure to an L2, motivation to learn, and developed competence in these skills in the L1. More specifically, Cummins suggests that "the development of competence in a second language L2 is partially a function of the type of competence already developed in the L1 at the time when intensive exposure to an L2 begins" (Cummins, 1979, p. 28). Therefore, when a child's L1 procedural and conceptual knowledge is adequately developed, this will mediate L2 development. Accordingly, children with low L1 language skills at the time of exposure to L2 will experience difficulty with L2 development.

Adding to this, primary-aged young learners in Greece are concurrently expanding their vocabularies in both their first language and a foreign language. The extent of a learner's L1 vocabulary is believed to influence the pace and eventual size of their L2 vocabulary (Masrai & Milton, 2015). Research by Biemiller and Slonim (2001) suggests that there is significant variability in the size of L1 vocabularies among young learners, and this variation is associated with later educational achievements. This further illustrates the importance of

a robust L1 foundation for successful L2 acquisition, aligning with the principles outlined by Cummins (1979).

Adding to the aforementioned, cognitive theories on reading and comprehension underscore the critical importance of inference-making in reading. Such cognitive models recognise the essential role of inferences in connecting segments of text to create coherence, highlighting a complex cognitive skill that transcends basic decoding abilities (van den Broek et al., 2015; Savić, 2018). This insight aligns seamlessly with the process of language transfer, showcasing the complex cognitive engagement that extends beyond simple word recognition. Research into the reading skills of young learners has delved into the processes they engage in while reading and understanding texts, revealing that initially, children focus predominantly on decoding and recognising words. This stage of learning restricts their comprehension mostly to the literal meanings within the text (textbase), while their capacity to draw inferences typically requires external prompting (Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005). The variation in children's ability to infer is influenced by factors such as working memory and prior knowledge, crucial for shaping their overall cognitive and reading comprehension skills (van den Broek et al., 2015). Studies have shown that as children age, they enhance these skills and become adept at concentrating on pertinent information and effectively accessing their background knowledge, thereby making sophisticated inferences even at an early age (van den Broek et al., 2015, p. 109).

Cummins (1979) also proposed the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model whereby skills, knowledge, and concepts learned in any language can be transferred across languages. He maintains that this CUP forms the base upon which L1, L2, or every other language is developed. This development is reciprocal. "As children develop high levels of L2 skills, their fluent access to two languages can give rise to enhancement both of L1 skills and other aspects of cognitive functioning" (Cummins, 1979, p. 34). Knowledge gained does not need to be relearned. According to Cummins, two forms of skills are identified: language-independent skills which rely on the quality and quantity of input and on individual attributes, and language-specific skills which rely mainly on the input given. Thereupon, in the case of phonological awareness, the overlap of sounds across languages accounts for the conditions that mediate transfer and acquisition. If L1 and L2 overlap phonologically then PA is primarily regarded as a specific language-independent skill and is transferred to L2 conditioned by the personal attributes of the learner and the quality and quantity of input. When this is not the case and they do not overlap, they are viewed as specific language skills, the development of which is contingent on the quality and quantity of input (Goodrich et al., 2013).

One point of convergence arises from the above theories: learners need strong motivation along with quality and quantity of input, which can be found in

storybooks as they provide a naturalistic and engaging exposure to high-quality text and reading. Participation in such literacy events constitutes the cornerstone of emergent literacy development as it effectively touches upon all its constituents (Chan & Sylva, 2015; Caesar & Nelson, 2014; Neumann et al., 2015).

Concisely, shared storybook reading promotes letter knowledge as learners process the visual information deriving from the graphemes; it improves phonological awareness as learners distinguish and explore the sounds of the words they hear; it develops letter/sound association as they process the phoneme/grapheme correlations they see, and it cultivates oral language skills in their effort to comprehend the meaning of the story and interact with the characters. Therefore, storybook reading challenges all those skills necessary for emergent language development in L1 and it remains to be seen if the same can be successfully applied in the very early stages of L2.

### **Significance of the Study**

In summary, the present study attempted to examine the potential of young Greek learners to develop emergent literacy skills in English from their own experiences with texts prior to formal instruction. It is an experimental study, where the researcher-teacher observed behaviours and learning processes of the Young Learners of English (YLE), participating in the research, without manipulating or controlling any variables. The study investigated the development of the ability to connect meaning with words and sounds with letters through shared book experiences and interaction with them in the pre-stages of second language acquisition, where YLE are exposed to home-like literacy environment experiences in L2 via printed material and without having previously received any formal instruction in L2. The theoretical framework relates to emergent literacy, namely, the literacy behaviours that children seem to develop prior to receiving any formal instruction mainly through exposure to text and to reading (Hall, 1987).

Since, in the particular study, participants are already literate in their native language, basic emergent L1 literacy skills have already been developed. Specifically, emergent conceptual knowledge is full-fledged, while procedural knowledge, which involves encoding/decoding skills and functional abilities in L1, is also developed and generally transferable (Roberts, 1994). Therefore, the two research questions investigated in this study were: (a) Do young Greek learners build up literacy skills and develop as emergent readers in English through informal exposure to text and reading? (b) To what extent does L1 linguistic competence affect L2 conceptual and procedural development? To address the first research question, learners were examined on letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and word decoding measures in the target language prior to the intervention and, again, at its conclusion. The second research question was

similarly investigated evaluating the same measures in the native language via a Greek standardised test conducted midway through the intervention. It was hypothesised that a statistically significant number of learners would develop L2 reading-related abilities and that L1 linguistic competence would highly affect L2 reading development.

## Method

This experimental research examined whether participation in literacy events can be applied to second language acquisition to prepare young learners of English for L2 literacy and reading development. It involved two groups of nine seven-year-old learners each: a control group and an experimental group. Following informed consent from the parents/guardians, two standardised tests were administered to assess the learners' language abilities. The emergent literacy components regarding L2 were the dependent variables that were investigated using an English standardised test battery (DIBELS). L1 linguistic competence was the independent variable that may influence the progress of the dependent variables, therefore, it was also examined to address the second research question by the use of another Greek standardised test (Porpodas).

Independent t-tests were used to compare differences between the experimental and control groups, whereas paired t-tests were used to analyse pre-post changes within each group, and, finally, Pearson correlations coefficients were calculated to examine relationships between L1 and L2 measures. Given the presence of latent variables related to gender, socioeconomic background, educational status, and cognitive and psychological factors, the study did not seek to establish a causal relationship between L1 and L2 conceptual and procedural development, but rather to examine the correlation between these variables.

## Participants

The research was conducted in two Greek primary schools. The first school was located on the outskirts of a small town in the prefecture of Imathia, while the second one was situated in the town centre. The experimental group, based at the school on the outskirts, consisted of nine second-grade students, most of whom came from a rural area and were of low economic, social, and educational status. There were no private language schools there, so the participants were formally exposed to the English language only at school, a factor that minimised the influence of external variables. Despite being a convenience sample,

participants possessed key characteristics that made them ideal for this research. The initial pool of potential participants for the control group, based in the town centre, consisted of seventeen second-grade students. Their educational, social, and economic background was slightly more advanced compared to the experimental group. Because of practical constraints, random assignment of participants was not possible. To ensure comparable conditions between groups, a matching procedure was implemented: students from the control group who attended private language schools were excluded from the study, as this additional English exposure would create an uncontrolled variable. This screening process eliminated eight students who were attending private language schools, resulting in a final control group of nine students ( $N = 9$ ). These nine students, like those in the experimental group, had not received any formal English language instruction outside of regular school hours.

## Materials

A total of ten books were selected and used in the study. All were authentic readers, written specifically for pre-school, native-English speakers. Other forms of authentic material would prove linguistically too demanding for the learners, as they had little or no knowledge of the target language. The following features were taken into consideration:

*Predictability through repeated patterns:* learners can accurately predict what comes next and produce some narrative on their own.

*Lift-the-flap or touch-and-feel books:* learners are encouraged to actively engage in the story involving all their senses.

*A motivating, meaningful context:* learners are by nature drawn to them and develop linguistically, emotionally, and culturally. (Justice & Kaderavek, 2002)

The following books were used:

*The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1994) by Eric Carle

*Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1996) by Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle

*Dear Zoo* (1986) and *My Presents* (1988) by Rod Campbell

*Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes* (2010) and *Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons* (2012) by Eric Litwin

*Where's Spot?* (2013) and *Where Are the Yellow Chicks, Spot?* (2019) by Eric Hill

*We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen (2019)

*That's Not My Dinosaur* by Fiona Watt (2020)

## Data Collection Instruments

Two standardised battery tests were used to measure the participants' progress in both groups. The first one, DIBELS 8th (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) examines letter identification, phonological awareness, and early literacy skills (DIBELS; Good & Kaminski, 2018). This test was administered before and after the intervention to investigate L2 development. The second test, a Tool for Detecting and Investigating Reading Difficulties in Kindergarten and in 1st and 2nd Grade of Primary School (Porpodas, 2007a) examines nonsense word fluency, phoneme segmentation, and reading comprehension, and was administered once halfway through the course of the intervention to evaluate students' existing reading skills in their native language. Specifically, DIBELS measured the following four areas:

- *Alphabetic Knowledge*: The Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) subtest included in the DIBELS assessment was used for measuring L2 alphabetic knowledge. The subjects were asked to identify as many letters of the English alphabet as they could. Either the name or the sound of the letter was considered to be correct. The raw score was the total number of letters that were identified correctly in one minute. The LNF version for kindergarten examines forty uppercase and lowercase letters starting with those that are used more frequently.
- *Phonological Awareness*: The Phonemic Segmentation Fluency (PSF) subtest investigates the subjects' ability to listen to words orally produced by the examiner and segment these words into their phonemes. For example, they hear the word 'am' and they produce /a/ /m/. The students received one point for each correct phoneme. In English r-controlled vowels and diphthongs are single phoneme sounds (Biancarosa et al., 2019). The English and Greek phonological systems treat vowels and diphthongs differently. In English, words like 'ear' (/E/ /ar/) and 'say' (/s/ /A/) are analysed as having two phonemes. However, their Greek equivalents are analysed as three-phoneme words. During assessment, this cross-linguistic difference was accommodated: students who segmented English vowels and diphthongs according to Greek phonological patterns were not penalised, as long as their segmentation was accurate. /A/ can be further segmented into /e/ /E/, a practice more familiar to Greek students. Consequently, the word 'take' can be analysed as /t/ /e/ /E/ /k/ and considered acceptable. Each correct phoneme accounted for one point.
- *Letter/sound association and word reading*: Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) and Word Reading Fluency (WRF) were used to measure learners' emergent literacy development. NWF consists of pseudowords whose structures are most commonly seen in English. They follow the Consonant-Vowel-Consonant (CVC) pattern and they resemble letter combinations that are used in English, however, they are nonsensical words designed to minimise

the influence of vocabulary familiarity (Biancarosa et al., 2019). At this part of the examination, students received one point for every correct sound in the word and one point for reading out the whole word. For example, if the student saw 'pon' and read /p/ /o/ /n/ they received three points for Correct Letter Sounds (CLS) and one point for the Words Read Correctly (WRC). On the contrary, on the Word Reading Fluency (WRF) subtest, each word received one point and was considered correct only when it was pronounced as a whole even if the student had first uttered the phonemes one by one. *The Tool for Investigating Reading Difficulties* was also administered to both groups and its main objective was to explore the second issue concerning the effect of L1 linguistic competence on the L2 conceptual and procedural development. It was administered and assessed following the prescribed test procedures (Porpodas, 2007b). Each correct answer was awarded one point culminating at 24 for NWR (Nonsense Word Reading) and PSF (Phonemic Segmentation Fluency) and 16 for the Reading Comprehension Test (RCT). Afterwards, there was a conversion of the raw scores to their standard scores mainly because the raw scores did not have an absolute zero and a standard measurement unit to enable comparisons. For this reason, it was necessary to convert raw scores to a secondary rating scale with a grading range from 1 to 19, mean value (M) of 10, and a standard deviation (SD) of 3.

## Procedure

Initially, participants in both the experimental and control groups were pre-tested to assess L2 alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence, and word reading. Afterwards, the participants in the experimental group were exposed to storybook readings and print-rich activities in general, whereas the children in the control group adhered to their standard English syllabus which involved the use of flashcards, songs, alphabet games, and action-oriented activities (Research Centre for Language Teaching and Testing, University of Athens, n.d.). The participants in both groups were exposed to English for 45 minutes, twice a week for six months. All the lessons were conducted by the same teacher and researcher of this study. Midway through the intervention, a Greek assessment test was administered to both groups to investigate the effect of L1 linguistic competence on L2 development. At the end of the study, both groups were assessed on L2 progress. All the standardised tests were conducted with the assistance of another colleague to ensure validity and reliability.

Four stages were devised for implementation within the intervention framework following Krashen's (2004) principles on free voluntary reading and compelling comprehensible input. These stages include read-aloud stories, shared

reading, and self-selected recreational reading, all focused on the reader's interest. In the first stage, stories were read by the teacher. Facial expressions, gestures, and intonation were used extensively to stimulate learners' motivation. There was no vocabulary presentation before the storybook readings. If a comprehension problem arose, there was a translation into their native language. There was a gradual switch from the use of L1 to the use of L2. Follow-up activities such as drawing or singing complemented the first reading. The second stage involved re-reading of the stories and encouragement of the students to read along. Attention was focused on print without formal instruction and code-related talk was introduced implicitly. During the initial reading of the book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* particular focus was placed on the distinct sounds of various consonants and vowels in the target language. For example, attention was drawn to the sounds of /b/ and /r/ in bear, /d/ in red, /f/ in frog, and /h/ in horse. Repetitive structures, such as green, sheep, see, or what, white, where, were grouped together and emphasised engagingly and playfully to enhance language acquisition. However, it is important to stress that the instructor's main objective was the plot of the story and the pleasure children derived from it. During the third stage, books were taken home and the caregivers were advised to read them with their children at bedtime. In the fourth stage, learners were asked to read a page of their favourite book or the whole story to their classmates.

**Table 1***Stages of the Intervention*

1st stage	Story-reading by the teacher in class Use of facial expressions, gestures and switch from L1 to L2
2nd stage	Re-reading of the stories by the teacher with learners' participation Use of code-related talk and implicit print referencing techniques
3rd stage	Borrowing of the books selected by the children Story-reading by the parents to the children
4th stage	Story-reading by the learners in class

## Results

The DIBELS test was administered to two groups of nine YLs each (experimental and control) to assess their L2 language abilities before and after six months of exposure. Raw scores were compared to designated benchmarks, with means and standard deviations calculated for each measure. Table 2 presents the initial profile for both groups.

Descriptive statistics from the DIBELS pre-test at the beginning of the intervention indicate that YLs in both the experimental and control groups scored below the benchmark on the LNF subtest, as expected, since none of the participants in either group had prior knowledge of L2 (experimental group  $M = 6.44$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ , control group  $M = 11.67$ ,  $SD = 6.12$ ,  $p = .036$ ). On the PSF subtest, learners in both groups performed slightly better with no statistically significant deviation (experimental group  $M = 12.56$ ,  $SD = 2.19$ , control group  $M = 14.89$ ,  $SD = 2.52$ ,  $p = .052$ ). The NWF subtest, which included CLS and WRC sections, was discontinued because both groups failed to produce any correct answers in the first line. Therefore, the WRF subtest was not administered during the pre-test phase (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Mean (SD) on DIBELS Pre-Test in Both Groups*

Pre-Test	Control	Experimental	$p$
LNF	11.67(6.12)	6.44(1.81)	.036
PSF	14.89(2.52)	12.56(2.19)	.052
NWF	0(0)	0(0)	–
WRF	0(0)	0(0)	–

Descriptive statistics derived from the DIBELS post-test at the end of the intervention indicate that the experimental group achieved great fluency gains on all subtests. On the LNF post-measurement, the experimental group demonstrated a higher mean score (experimental group  $M = 20.44$ ,  $SD = 8.78$ , control group  $M = 13.78$ ,  $SD = 8.35$ ,  $p = .118$ ). On the PSF subtest, a higher mean score was also present in the experimental group (experimental group  $M = 24.44$ ,  $SD = 5.53$ , control group  $M = 17.33$ ,  $SD = 6.42$ ,  $p = .023$ ). Similarly, in the NWF section, the experimental group achieved a higher mean score compared to the control group (experimental group  $M = 35.89$ ,  $SD = 21.81$ , control group  $M = 13.67$ ,  $SD = 12.59$ ,  $p = .018$ ). Finally, in the WRF subtest, the experimental group recorded a notably higher mean (experimental group  $M = 8.89$ ,  $SD = 3.30$ , control group  $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = 2.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Mean (SD) on DIBELS Post-Test in Both Groups*

Post-Test	Control	Experimental	$p$
LNF	13.78(8.35)	20.44(8.78)	.118
PSF	17.33(6.42)	24.44(5.53)	.023
NWF	13.67(12.59)	35.89(21.81)	.018
WRF	2.11(2.52)	8.89(3.30)	< .001

A comparison of the raw and final scores in L2 reveals significant progress in the experimental group compared to the control group. In the control group, mean scores showed modest improvement: LNF increased from 11.67 to 13.78 ( $p = .069$ ), PSF from 14.89 to 17.33 ( $p = .309$ ), NWF from .00 to 13.67 ( $p = .012$ ) and WRF from .00 to 2.11 ( $p = .036$ ). These results suggest that there was a slight improvement in the PSF and NWF tests in the control group (Table 4). In contrast, the experimental group demonstrated statistically significant gains across all measures in language literacy performance: LNF escalated from 6.44 to 20.44 ( $p = .001$ ), PSF from 12.56 to 24.44 ( $p < .001$ ), NWF from .00 to 35.89 ( $p = .001$ ) and WRF from .00 to 8.89 ( $p < .001$ ) (Tables 4–5).

**Table 4**

*Mean (SD) for the DIBELS Scores in Pre- and Post-Measurements in the Control Group*

Control group	Pre-	Post-	$p$
LNF	11.67(6.12)	13.78(8.35)	.069
PSF	14.89(2.52)	17.33(6.42)	.309
NWF	0(0)	13.67(12.59)	.012
WRF	0(0)	2.11(2.52)	.036

**Table 5**

*Mean (SD) for the DIBELS Scores in Pre- and Post-Measurements in the Experimental Group*

Experimental group	Pre-	Post-	$p$
LNF	6.44(1.81)	20.44(8.78)	.001
PSF	12.56(2.19)	24.44(5.53)	< .001
NWF	0(0)	35.89(21.81)	.001
WRF	0(0)	8.89(3.30)	< .001

The Tool for Investigating Reading Difficulties by Porpodas, the Greek assessment test, was administered to both groups midway through the intervention. This test was administered to evaluate linguistic competency in L1 and to determine whether and how L1 mediates L2 acquisition. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 6. The control group scored higher on the NWR test (experimental group  $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = 3.64$ , control group  $M = 8.89$ ,  $SD = 4.23$ ,  $p = .092$ ). No statistically significant differences were found between the groups in the PSF subtest (experimental group  $M = 10.44$ ,  $SD = 2.30$ , control group  $M = 10.44$ ,  $SD = 3.36$ ,

$p = .999$ ) or in the RCT subtest (experimental group  $M = 10.56$ ,  $SD = 3.81$ , control group  $M = 9.44$ ,  $SD = 4.03$ ,  $p = .557$ ).

**Table 6**

*Mean (SD) for Porpodas in Both Groups*

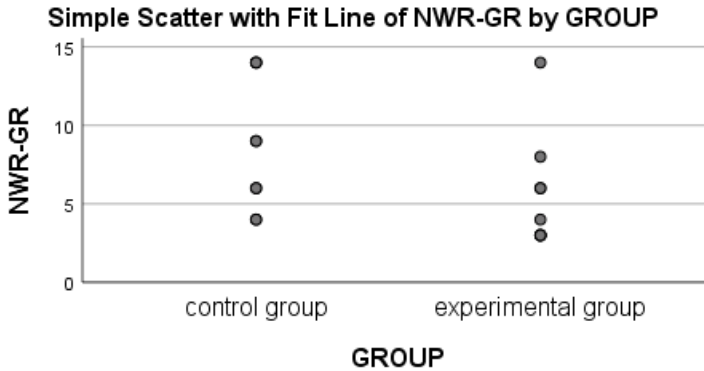
	Control	Experimental	$p$
NWRGR	8.89(4.23)	5.56(3.64)	.092
PSFGR	10.44(3.36)	10.44(2.3)	.999
RCTGR	9.44(4.03)	10.56(3.81)	.557

## Analysis and Interpretation of the Results

1. The test results that were collected and then analysed indicate the following: No statistically significant group differences were found on the pre-test PSF subtest. On LNF, however, the experimental group scored significantly lower than the control group at baseline ( $p = .036$ ), indicating that the experimental group began from a lower starting point. The examination was discontinued after the LNF and the PSF subtests since all learners from both groups failed to produce any correct answers on the CLS subpart. In other words, the general performance (mean scaled score) of both groups shows that YLs in both schools had no prior knowledge of L2.
2. Statistically significant differences between the scaled score means of the two groups are reported for one attribute of the Greek assessment battery. On average, the experimental group scored lower on NWR, an attribute reflecting letter/sound combination and decoding ability. Specifically, 5.56 compared to 8.89 for NWR suggests that the control group has slightly better developed reading skills. Figure 3 demonstrates that the NWR scores cluster around the lower levels of the score scale, whereas scores for the control group are distributed evenly across all levels. Since this discrepancy pertains to only one attribute of the Greek assessment battery and both groups' scores are distributed across the entire scale, we assume that both groups exhibit no statistically significant differences in their L1 development.

**Figure 3**

*Comparison of the Two Groups' Results on Porpodas NWR*



3. Statistically significant differences between the scores of the two groups are clearly evident in the DIBELS post-tests (LNF, PSF, NWF, and WRF) administered at the end of the six-month period of L2 exposure. Specifically, participants in the intervention group exhibited remarkable progress compared to the control group on all attributes of the DIBELS assessment battery as can be inferred from Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*Clustered Bar Mean Comparing the Progress of the DIBELS Test between the Two Groups*

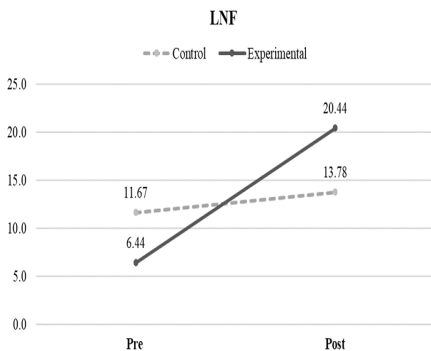


Figure 4a. Mean scores on the LNF test in both groups across time

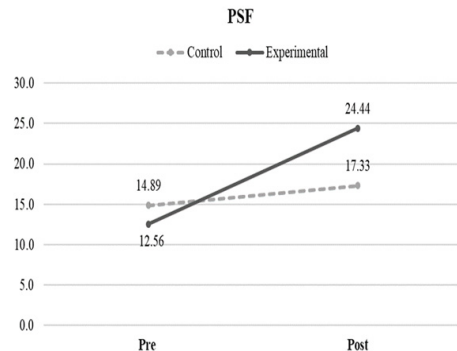


Figure 4b. Mean scores on the PSF test in both groups across time

Figure 4 continued

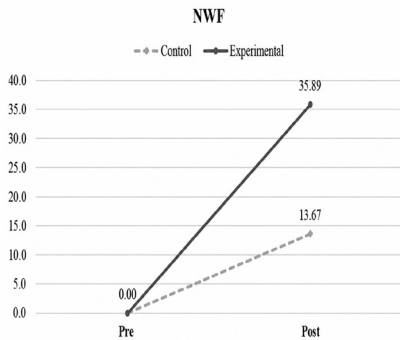


Figure 4c. Mean scores on the NWF test in both groups across time

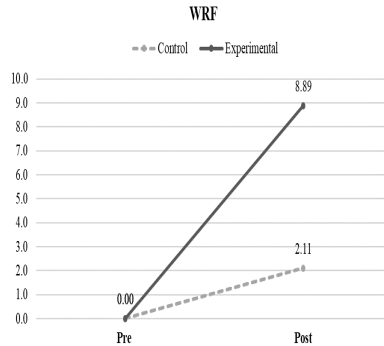


Figure 4d. Mean scores on the WRF test in both groups across time

This visual presentation reflects significant improvement by the experimental group in L2 across all measured attributes, suggesting a potentially robust relationship between shared reading and L2 reading development in the very early stages. However, further analysis of individual performance reveals considerable variability in most attributes. For example, on the LNF subtest, a standard deviation (SD) of 9.7 indicates a wide dispersion: three out of nine students scored above 25, four ranged between 16 and 24, and the remaining three scored below the benchmark. On the PSF subtest, the SD is 6.431, with all learners scoring above the benchmark. On the CLS subtest, the SD is notably high at 22.045, reflecting a bimodal distribution of scores: five students scored above 36 and successfully read simple consonant-vowel-consonant words, while the remaining four scored below 19, struggling to read unfamiliar English words. In contrast, participants exhibited greater homogeneity on the WRF measure, with an SD of 3.812. Here, four students read five to six words, while five students managed to read 11 to 13 words.

The nature of this study combined with the above results implies that further analysis is needed to identify whether relations exist between L1 linguistic competence and L2 procedural and conceptual development. To address the second research question and examine whether differences in L1 development may partially account for the observed variations in L2 performance, additional analyses were conducted. The results are presented in Tables 7, 8, and 9.

**Table 7**

*NWR-GR and DIBELS Post-Tests—Correlations (Experimental Group)*

		NWRGR	LNF Post-Test	PSF Post-Test	NWF Post-Test	WRF Post-Test
NWRGR	Pearson Correlation	1	.480	.427	.577	.422
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.191	.252	.104	.258
	<i>N</i>	9	9	9	9	9

**Table 8**

*PSF-GR and DIBELS Post-Tests—Correlations (Experimental Group)*

		PSFGR	LNF Post-Test	PSF Post-Test	NWF Post-Test	WRF Post-Test
PSFGR	Pearson Correlation	1	.194	.288	.425	.189
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.309	.226	.127	.313
	<i>N</i>	9	9	9	9	9

**Table 9**

*RCT-GR and DIBELS Post-Tests—Correlations (Experimental Group)*

		RCTGR	LNF Post-Test	PSF Post-Test	NWF Post-Test	WRF Post-Test
RCTGR	Pearson Correlation	1	.414	.307	.631	.593
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.268	.421	.068	.093
	<i>N</i>	9	9	9	9	9

The results indicate positive correlations between Porpodas’ NWR and the participants’ performance on the English NWF ( $r = .577$ ), which may be regarded as indicative of mastering the ability to read since LNF and PSF are precursors to reading (Table 7). Likewise, moderate-to-strong correlations (though not statistically significant at this sample size) were observed between Porpodas’ RCT and scores in NWF ( $r = .631$ ) and WRF ( $r = .593$ ) (Table 9). Finally, a positive correlation was found between Porpodas’ PSF and NWF ( $r = .425$ ) (Table 8). Overall, high performance on the L1 NWF and RCT was associated with stronger performance on the English NWF at post-test. In other words, students whose L1 NWR and RCT performance was classified as average to above average tended to demonstrate greater progress in L2 reading-related skills.

The control group also completed the Greek assessment battery. Additional analyses were conducted to see whether there is any correlation between the Greek and the English assessment tests among learners who had no purposeful exposure to text and reading.

**Table 10***NWR-GR and DIBELS Post-Tests—Correlations (Control Group)*

		NWR-GR	LNF Post-Test	PSF Post-Test	NWF Post-Test	WRF Post-Test
NWR-GR	Pearson Correlation	1	.407	.545	-.177	-.046
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.277	.129	.649	.907
	<i>N</i>	9	9	9	9	9

**Table 11***PSF-GR and DIBELS Post-Tests—Correlations (Control Group)*

		PSF-GR	LNF Post-Test	PSF Post-Test	NWF Post-Test	WRF Post-Test
PSF-GR	Pearson Correlation	1	.517	.612	.317	.185
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.154	.080	.405	.633
	<i>N</i>	9	9	9	9	9

**Table 12***RCT-GR and DIBELS Post-Tests—Correlations (Control Group)*

		RCT-GR	LNF Post-Test	PSF Post-Test	NWF Post-Test	WRF Post-Test
RCT-GR	Pearson Correlation	1	-.026	.423	-.403	-.141
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.946	.257	.282	.718
	<i>N</i>	9	9	9	9	9

An interesting pattern emerges when examining the results. LNF and PSF are highly correlated with NWR-GR ( $r = .407$  and  $r = .545$  respectively) and with PSF-GR ( $r = .517$  and  $r = .612$  respectively), (Table 10). Correlations with the other subparts are mostly negative: NWF and WRF are negatively correlated with NWR-GR ( $r = -.177$  and  $r = -.046$  respectively) and with RCT-GR ( $r = -.403$  and  $r = -.141$  respectively), (Table 12). PSF-GR, on the other hand, presents positive correlations with all attributes (Table 11). The data presented in these tables is discussed further in the following section.

The research data presented in Tables 10, 11, and 12 indicate that a subset of students exposed to L2 shared reading successfully developed effective reading skills. Two participants scored 67 and 69 on the CLS, 15 and 20 on the WRC, and 13 and 12 on the WRF, respectively, and were classified as exhibiting minimal risk, performing well above the benchmark according to DIBELS end-of-year evaluations for native speakers. Another two students scored 45 and 42 on the CLS, 12 and 10 on the NWF, and 11 on the WRF, respectively, and were also characterised as facing minimal risk, scoring above the benchmark on the CLS, NWF, and WRF subtests. The remaining five participants ( $N = 5$ ) showed notable progress, improving their DIBELS status from non-responding to below benchmark, providing evidence of L2 reading development. This functional relationship, indicating that the progress is directly attributable to the intervention, is further supported by the comparatively smaller improvement observed in the control group. Despite receiving standard L2 instruction through the formal syllabus over the same period, the control group demonstrated relatively minimal gains.

## Discussion

However, the findings should be interpreted with caution. It is important to note that although all participants in the intervention showed improvement in the sub-skills, considerable variability was observed in their performance. Notably, five out of the nine learners encountered difficulty in reading simple consonant-vowel-consonant words.

One possible explanation for this variation lies in differences in L1 linguistic competence. Participants with advanced L1 linguistic competence appeared to make greater fluency gains in L2 reading development, suggesting that L1 competence is a strong developmental predictor. More specifically, four learners who achieved the highest score in DIBELS post-test had also obtained the highest score on the Greek assessment test. The only exception was one learner who did well on the Greek test but was a low achiever on DIBELS. These results address the second research question. The findings suggest that well-developed L1 skills facilitate the acquisition of a second language and, more specifically, the Greek attributes NWR, PSF, and RCT were found to significantly predict performance on the English NWF and WRF measures. The subtest results indicate a relationship between L1 linguistic competence and learners' L2 developmental outcomes. However, to gain a more complete understanding of the nature of the relationships between L1 skills and L2 reading development, further examination of the correlation results from the control group is necessary.

The learners in the control group had developed native language-related skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge, which they drew upon when working in L2. They successfully transferred this knowledge to language-independent skills. This explains the positive correlations identified between L1 skills and L2 PSF (.545), NWF (.612), and LNF (.423). These findings align with the idea that a significant overlap in sounds allows phonological awareness (PA) to function as a specific language-independent skill, facilitating transfer. Similarly, one could speculate that letter knowledge, encompassing knowledge of letters and their sounds, is largely language-specific. However, given that ten letters and their corresponding sounds are shared between the two languages (Aa, Ee, Ii, Kk, M, N, Oo, Ss, T, Zz), it can be argued that letter knowledge and letter-sound associations exhibit traits of language-independent skills. This may account for the positive correlations observed in the control group between PSF and LNF (0.517) and between NWR and LNF (0.407). Put simply, learners with well-developed L1 reading skills (NWR) were able to identify letters and segment sounds in L2 by transferring their L1 letter and sound knowledge. When examining the transfer of language-specific skills, however, focus should be on the quality and quantity of the input provided.

Respectively, no positive correlations were reported between L1 performance and DIBELS NWF and WRF, as these are language-specific skills whose improvement depends on the quality and quantity of input. However, high negative correlations warrant attention. Successful L1 learners scored noticeably low on the NWF and WRC subtests, which required reading words in English. Based on the learners' test responses, it became evident that they refrained from taking risks or producing responses they believed to be incorrect. During the DIBELS post-test, successful learners often avoided certain subtests, stating that they did not want to continue because they did not know how to read in English. In contrast, less successful learners attempted the tasks and produced some correct responses on CLS subtest, which may explain the observed negative correlations.

The study findings suggest that learners achieve greater fluency gains through immersion in a print-rich environment and the use of implicit, print referencing techniques. The results of this exploratory study challenge the notion that implicit contexts for learning literacy—such as opportunities for literacy-related play and high-quality physical literacy environments, which provide children with resources like books, visual print materials, and literacy-related props—are inadequate for fostering the development of emergent literacy in many children (Piasta, 2016). It highlights the importance of employing storytelling sessions and shared book reading to support young learners' emergent literacy development in L2. While the results are promising, they should be interpreted with caution due to the limited sample size and the variation in progress among the learners. Overall, the results of the study contribute to

our understanding of the complex interplay between L1 and L2 skills and the factors that influence L2 reading development in young learners.

While L1 competence plays a significant role in L2 development, other factors may also contribute to the observed variation in learner progress. Individual differences, such as cognitive abilities, working memory capacity, and phonological processing skills could play a crucial role in how children benefit from exposure to L2 print materials. As suggested by Cummins's (1979) Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis, these individual attributes interact with the quality and quantity of L2 input to facilitate language transfer and acquisition. Motivation is another key factor likely to influence L2 literacy development in this context. The study's use of age-appropriate, engaging storybooks may have affected learners' motivation levels. As Krashen (2004) emphasises, compelling comprehensible input is crucial for language acquisition. Therefore, individual preferences for certain story types or themes could impact engagement levels and, consequently, learning outcomes. Furthermore, the home environment and parental involvement, although not directly measured in this study, may have contributed to the observed variation. The third stage of the intervention involved parents reading books with their children at home. Differences in parental reading habits, attitudes towards L2 learning, and the quality of these shared reading experiences could have influenced children's progress. This aligns with research by Burgess et al. (2002) and Yeung and King (2016), who highlight the importance of the home literacy environment for both L1 and L2 development. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between L1 and L2 skills more comprehensively, including the role of L2 input and instructional approaches. Future studies should consider incorporating measures of cognitive abilities, motivation, and home literacy practices to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing L2 literacy development in home-like environments.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

Based on the analysis of the experimental study on emergent L2 literacy among Greek young learners of English, several limitations and avenues for future research emerge. The study acknowledges the importance of letter-sound associations alongside oral language and phonological awareness. These foundational skills, fostered through informal instruction in a home-like literacy environment, are crucial for emergent literacy development. The study's methodology effectively captures progress in these areas, demonstrating the potential benefits of exposure to enriched English print stories. However, the limitations of a small

sample size underscore the need for future research to adopt longitudinal studies with larger and more diverse cohorts. Due to the very small sample, the results obtained from this research project cannot be generalised to the larger population. Thus, future investigations could benefit from a longitudinal approach, potentially incorporating experimental manipulations to establish causal relationships more definitely. Employing diverse methodologies, including eye-tracking technologies, could offer deeper insights into how young learners engage with text and develop emergent literacy skills in L2. Finally, this research opens the door to comparing the effectiveness of various types of literacy interventions in L2 settings. Investigating different reading contexts and materials, as well as their impact on a broader range of early literacy abilities, would enrich our understanding of effective strategies for supporting emergent learners of English. This could include examining the role of digital literacy tools and their efficacy in fostering emergent literacy skills in a second language.

## Conclusion

This study has explored the efficacy of literacy-based instruction in developing emergent second-language literacy skills in young learners prior to formal literacy instruction. The findings reveal that all participants demonstrated varying degrees of improvement, dependent on their L1 linguistic competence. However, although not all learners achieved the same level of reading proficiency, they all developed significant, emergent sub-skills that are precursors to reading and are likely to positively influence their subsequent L2 growth and cognition.

Being a holistic approach, storybook reading not only enhances low-level reading skills but also fosters cognitive, emotional, and social development in children. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* highlights the virtues of self-control, well-being, happiness, and the inevitable journey of growth and transformation. In contrast, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* illustrates that life is filled with obstacles one must face and overcome. Meanwhile, *Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes* reminds us to maintain a positive attitude, no matter what challenges come our way. During shared reading, participants interact with texts, construct language, and develop complex cognitive processes. The benefits of early, systematic exposure to text and reading are widely acknowledged, and this research extends their applicability to the L2 learning context, providing a framework for language teachers to integrate storybooks and shared reading into their instruction without requiring additional resources or effort. Teachers can structure their

instruction including storybooks and shared reading in the L2 classroom without the need for substantial changes to their syllabus or curriculum.

The use of authentic, age-appropriate literature activates learners' imagination and introduces them to engaging, imaginary worlds that influence their emotional and behavioural development (Mart, 2012). Exposure to complex linguistic structures contributes significantly to their syntactic and structural development, while vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical control can also be improved (Krashen, 2004). When considering young learners, it is crucial to recognise that incorporating stories into the daily curriculum results in a positive and enjoyable learning experience that reduces anxiety and cultivates a positive disposition towards foreign language learning and education overall.

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