

READING IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE

AGE AND GENDER DIFFERENCES, AND PERSONAL AND FAMILIAL PREDICTORS

Summary

Reading is a key academic skill, not just for school success, but also for general human adaptation and navigating the modern world, where written information and written communication are inevitable in all areas of life. In 2017, Croatia adopted the five-year *National Strategy for Reading Promotion*. To achieve the goals defined by the *Strategy*, empirical data on reading skills and their predictors in all stages of the development of reading literacy are needed. Although Croatia has joined two international reading literacy studies in the last ten or so years – the PIRLS study, involving fourth-grade elementary school students, and the PISA study, involving 15-year-olds – empirical data on reading competencies of Croatian students are scarce. Crucially, PIRLS and PISA results show that the reading literacy of fourth-grade Croatian students is above the international average while the reading literacy of fifteen-year-olds is below the international average. This suggests that, relative to their peers from other countries, Croatian students' development of reading competencies in the upper grades of elementary school exhibits a negative trend. According to stage theories of reading development, early adolescence is a crucial period for the development of reading literacy. At that age, the transition from beginning to more complex reading skills should take place, and learning to read should transform into reading to learn.

The purpose of the research presented in this book was to contribute to the knowledge of reading competencies of Croatian students in early adolescence. We sought to answer two research questions. First, what are the age and gender differences in (a) reading skills and (b) individual psychological and familial factors associated with children's reading skills in early adolescence (the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grade of elementary school)? Second, to what extent are individual psychological and familial contextual factors predictive of reading skills? We operationalized reading skills using two measures: word decoding speed and reading comprehension. Individual psychological factors related to reading skills included motivation for reading (intrinsic and extrinsic), reading habits (the amount of reading traditional printed and digital texts, as well as knowledge of book titles as an indicator of literature exposure), and language abilities (operationalized as vocabulary and grammatical knowledge). Familial contextual factors included four indicators of the family reading environment: parental education, number of books in the household, parents' reading habits, and parents' attitudes toward reading. Participants in the study were 814 students (51.4% girls) from seven elementary schools in Zagreb.

The results showed that girls, compared to boys, had higher intrinsic motivation to read (in all grades except the fourth, where girls' and boys' intrinsic reading motivation did not differ); spent more time reading traditional print, and less time reading digital texts; knew the titles of books better (but only in the fourth and sixth grade, and not in the fifth and seventh grade); had a richer vocabulary; decoded words faster and had better reading comprehension. Younger children had higher levels of both types of reading motivation than older ones. With regard to extrinsic reading motivation, age differences were observed for children of both genders, and the most prominent differences were found

between the sixth and seventh grade. With regard to intrinsic reading motivation, the age difference was observed only for boys – boys in the fourth grade had significantly higher intrinsic motivation for reading than boys in the upper grades. Older children, compared to younger children, reported more time spent reading digital texts; they also had a richer vocabulary and greater grammatical knowledge, were faster in decoding words, and understood texts better. Statistically significant predictors of individual differences in word decoding speed were gender, age, intrinsic motivation for reading, vocabulary, and grammatical knowledge. Girls, children in higher grades, and those who had higher intrinsic motivation for reading, a richer vocabulary, and better knowledge of grammar, decoded words faster. Predictors of text comprehension were age, the number of books in the household, extrinsic motivation for reading, recognition of book titles, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and word decoding speed. Children attending higher grades, children who had more books at home, children with lower extrinsic motivation for reading, children who knew more book titles, who had a richer vocabulary, who knew grammar better and who decoded words faster exhibited better text comprehension. Predictive models differed to a lesser extent for girls and boys and children of different ages. The most pronounced differences in the predictive models suggested that different aspects of the home environment contribute to the reading comprehension of girls versus boys, and that the contribution of language skills to reading speed increases with age, whereas the importance of reading speed for text comprehension decreases. In the overall sample, the set of predictors explained 37% of word decoding speed variance and 49% of reading comprehension variance.

The findings of this study support reading development theories and show that reading skills significantly improve in early adolescence. The results also support recent theoretical models of reading skills predictors, which explain reading development as relying not only on cognitive-linguistic abilities, but also on motivational and behavioral factors such as reading habits, as well as contextual factors which include the family reading environment. Our results suggest that reading skills in early adolescence may be improved by enhancing intrinsic and reducing extrinsic reading motivation, increasing children's exposure to age-suitable literature, expanding vocabulary, improving grammatical knowledge and enriching the home library, and that – in doing so – special attention should be devoted to boys' reading skills. Overall, these results may be applied in developing interventions to raise school-age children's reading literacy and thus contribute to achieving the objectives set forth in the *National Strategy for Reading Promotion*.

Keywords: *reading comprehension, word decoding speed, language skills, reading motivation, reading habits, family reading environment, early adolescence*