

# Article review on the relationship between reading skills in early english

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## The Relationship Between Reading Skills in Early English as a Foreign Language and Hungarian as a First Language:

Marianne Nikolov and Benő Csapó's paper, *The Relationship Between Reading Skills in Early English as a Foreign Language and Hungarian as a First Language*, seeks to discover how Hungarian school children's reading skills in English as their second language is affected by their proficiency in their first language as well as elements of the second language. The authors make use of two studies to explore this. The first study tests sixth and eighth graders' reading proficiency in both Hungarian (L1) and English (L2). The second study tested eighth graders in the county of Baranya in Hungary in reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and writing skills in both the L1 and L2.

A review of the literature focuses on the need for more research to compare their findings to, as well as controversy in differing results from other studies. The authors state that "the old concept of (low road) transfer as a direct transmission of skills has been challenged and substituted by the concept of 'preparation for future learning' . . . Walter proposes that it is more relevant to think in terms of 'access to an already existing, non-linguistic skill' (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 316). In other words, skills not directly related to language such as "metalinguistic awareness, metacognitive knowledge and strategies" are proposed as part of what influences L2 learning (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 317). Another question posed by the literature review is "whether reading in L2 is a language problem or a reading problem" (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 317). Considering

the complexity of results from previous literature, the authors of this study state they are not testing hypotheses, but “ based on data collected in a particular educational context, we intend to examine how learners’ performances interact on reading comprehension tasks in L1 and L2 with other variables” (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 317). In other words, the authors will not make predictions about the results, but will explore the effects of reading comprehension in L1 and other variables according to previous theories simply to compare results with what has been hypothesized in past studies.

The final sections of the article provide the context of the study, explanation of research questions, participants, data collection instruments, procedures, results, discussion, and conclusion. Overall, the results show that there is a stronger correlation between L1 and L2 reading comprehension in earlier grades versus the older grades. The study also found that in both grades, there was a slightly stronger relationship “ between students’ inductive reasoning scores and L2 skills than between their L1 reading scores and L2 skills” (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 320). The authors also found that for eighth graders, the strongest relationship “ is found between L2 writing and L2 reading . . . whereas L2 listening scores are also closely connected to L2 reading . . . and L2 writing scores (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 321). However, other analysis shows relationships between other elements and L2 proficiency, including non-linguistic factors such as grade point average, history grade, and the father’s schooling (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 324).

The qualitative method used for this study included two surveys of samples of Hungarian students. The first one was a representative sample of 4756 Hungarian students in grades six and 3982 Hungarian students in grade eight, testing their reading comprehension in English as well as in Hungarian. The second study had a smaller sample of 247 eighth grade Hungarian students from a specific county, Baranya, and examined reading and listening comprehension and listening skills in both English and Hungarian. The tests were given in a classroom setting and the tasks required of the students were of a type that was familiar to them (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 319-320).

The tables show the results of the correlation coefficients for both studies, examining which factors had the most significant relationship to others, such as how Hungarian reading skills influence English writing skills. The authors also examine a multiple regression analysis from the second study concerning the students' L1 and L2 performance as well as a multiple regression analysis of several more variables for the grade six and grade eight students from the first study.

One of the strong aspects of Nikolov and Csapó's paper is that as of the publication of the study, the particular variables and subjects studied are unique. Many studies exist on the learning of foreign languages, but the importance of this study is revealed in Section 3. 1, the context, in which the authors state that " The Hungarian population's levels of proficiency in modern languages have been extremely low" especially in comparison to other European nations (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 318). The authors believe

that “ the knowledge of foreign languages is especially important [in Hungary], as the L1 is not widely spoken in other countries” (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 318). Therefore, the findings in this study will provide researchers and educators some ideas on what factors are the most important in being able to teach English as a second language to students with success.

The sample size for the first study was very large, including 4758 grade six students and 3982 grade eight students. The sample size for the second study was much smaller, including 247 grade eight students from a specific county, Baranya, in Hungary. Interestingly, the authors state that for their results, the “ findings in the large-scale project may be due to the diversity of the huge sample, whereas in the smaller project relationships are clearer” (Nikolov & Csapó 2010, p. 325). Most often, researchers seem to believe that a larger sample size is better and more representative of a population as a whole, while smaller samples may be limited in the information they can offer because of the lack of diversity in the subjects, but Nikolov and Csapó appear to feel the opposite. The issues resulting from the diversity of the large sample are not discussed in this paper, and the authors do not state why they declined to discuss that in this paper. It may be that they felt that the diversity issue was beyond the scope of this paper or is better as a subject for future research, but it would have been helpful if they authors had made more than a passing mention of the problem.

There are no problems with the independent and dependent variables included in this study. The independent variables, the sixth and eighth grade

students, are directly compared with the dependent variables, L1 and L2 language skills. The results demonstrated in the tables, discussion, and conclusion are easy to interpret. One strange element appears in the discussion section regarding analysis, in that a comparison with Croatian students appears. Although the comparison of Hungarian students and Croatian students has some relevance, it is curious that the Croatian students are suddenly introduced at this point in the paper.

The sample selection and the testing methods appear to be reliable sources of information and results. Because the testing was done in a classroom environment with tasks that were familiar to the students, the students could focus on completing the tasks without the distraction of an artificial laboratory setting, and would likely perform as they usually do on similar classroom tests. If the setting had been alien to the students, this could have affected their performance on the tests even if the tasks were familiar to them. However, a possible weakness is that the tasks presented were familiar to the students; for instance, if students are used to taking a standardized multiple-choice test, they may be skilled at taking this kind of test which may not reflect their real comprehension or skills of a language. The particular style of testing or students' ability to take tests are not examined by this study, which may weaken the validity of the data.

The confidence interval of the results is not a focus of this study since the authors made no hypotheses. It is a unique study with variables not presented in any other study, so it is difficult to compare this study with the information discussed in the literature review portion of the paper. Although

the lack of hypotheses and ability to compare the results with other studies could be considered a weakness, it is virtually impossible to avoid because of the lack of preexisting data. It is a strength of the study that the researchers chose to select new and unexplored variables to compare, which can be a basis for further studies.

Overall, the paper is well written and presents new and valuable information for researchers and teachers of foreign languages. Readers will easily understand that the information presented and its analysis have little precedence, though similar studies have been done in different ways. Importantly, the authors stress the need for further research because of the complexity in relationships they discovered in elements that influence learning a foreign language.

## References

Nikolov, Marianne & Csapó, Benő (2010). The Relationship Between Reading Skills in Early English as a Foreign Language and Hungarian as a First Language. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 14(3), 315-329.