

Reading to kids a crucial tool in English language development

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Poring over the works of Dr. Seuss, the adventures of the Bernstein Bears or exploring the worlds of Hans Christian Andersen with a child has always been a great parent-child bonding exercise.

But, according to George Georgiou, a University of Alberta professor in [educational psychology](#), it is instrumental for English-speaking children if they are to acquire the [language skills](#), particularly comprehension, essential to their future [reading ability](#).

Georgiou and his colleagues recently published a study in *Learning and Instruction* examining the cognitive and non-cognitive factors that may predict future reading ability in English and Greek. Since the study was published, Georgiou has expanded his research to Finland and China, with the same outcomes.

He says the home literacy environment-what parents do at home in terms of literacy-and [motivation](#) predict children's various initial literacy skills, such as letter knowledge and [vocabulary](#), differently across languages. These skills, in turn, ultimately predict future reading ability.

Studying language for success

Orthography is the part of the study of language dealing with letters and spelling. Georgiou points out that English is an orthographically inconsistent language; in other words, letters can have more than one

sound each. Because of this, he says, children learning English "need someone to show them the letters, teach them the letter sounds, play with letter magnets on the fridge.

"We have found that in English, you need a rich home literacy environment. It's absolutely necessary," he says.

But that's not the case in other languages. Georgiou notes that students are able to learn to read faster in languages such as Greek and Finnish, because there is one-to-one correspondence between a letter and its sounds. This difference with English, he says, implies that Greek or Finnish parents do not need to read as frequently to their children to give them an edge on learning the language. Simply put, Greek or Finnish children will eventually learn to read regardless of how rich the home literacy environment may be.

"In Greece, parents intuitively know that as soon as a child goes to school, within three months, unless there are some severe situations that may interfere with learning, that child will be able to learn to read," said Georgiou. "Alternatively, in English, having someone read to you frequently as a child-explaining what the meaning of words are and playing around with the letters-makes a big difference as to whether you will become a good reader."

English-languages challenges for students

Without that learning support and because of the inconsistencies of English orthography, English-speaking children run the risk of falling behind at least two years in terms of their reading skill when compared to children learning to read in languages with a direct relationship between letters and sounds, he said. But, if mom and dad don't have the time to invest in reading to their children and still want them to succeed with language development, then educational programs, such as Sesame

Street, and multimedia tools, such as spelling programs or games, may be an alternative.

Georgiou also lauds the efforts of communities in getting behind literacy programs and encouraging the development of literacy skills through initiatives such as "raise a reader" and "read-in week." He says that these types of programs pay dividends because they are a key component in motivating children to appreciate and embrace reading as a worthwhile activity.

There are key elements Canadian parents should focus on to promote the success of their children as active readers, he says. Foremost, reading to your [children](#) is vital, as is specific exercises and games to teach them letter names and sounds. Finally, having role models as a motivation to [read](#), whether it be an NHL player reading to a classroom full of kids or a parent at bedtime, is also highly important, says Georgiou.

"Build their motivation. If your child sees you reading at home, that sends a message to that child that you value reading."

Provided by University of Alberta

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