

Implicit Acquisition of Orthographic Regularities in Italian Children: A Longitudinal Study of Reading, Writing, and Orthographic Judgement

Saturday, September 13, 2025 2:10 PM (20 minutes)

In transparent orthographies like Italian, children acquire phonological decoding skills rapidly due to consistent grapheme–phoneme correspondences. However, fluent literacy also relies on the internalisation of abstract orthographic patterns that are not explicitly taught.

This study investigated whether Italian-speaking children implicitly acquire orthographic regularities—specifically legality, bigram frequency, and word typicality—during the first two years of primary school, and how these regularities influence reading, spelling, and orthographic judgment performance over time.

Fifty-four children were assessed at four time points (T1–T4) using tasks that tested reading accuracy and speed, spelling (DDO-2), and orthographic judgment. Stimuli included real words, legal pseudowords, and illegal nonwords, systematically manipulated for lexical frequency, word length, bigram frequency, and syllabic structure.

Reading accuracy improved rapidly and plateaued after T2, while reading speed increased progressively. Spelling performance showed a slower, more gradual improvement, consolidating toward T4. Orthographic judgment accuracy increased across sessions, particularly for illegal nonwords, suggesting implicit learning of orthotactic constraints. Bigram frequency had a significant effect, whereas syllable frequency did not. Word length and lexicality also influenced performance, with high-frequency and shorter words eliciting fewer errors and faster responses.

Findings support a multi-componential model of literacy development in which implicit statistical learning, lexical familiarity, and sublexical processing interact dynamically. Even in highly transparent orthographies, orthographic competence emerges through experience-driven learning mechanisms beyond phonological decoding.

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Session Classification: Lunch and poster 3

Track Classification: Language, reading and music