# The Acquisition of Reading and Writing Skills in Italy and Spain: a Bibliographic Review

*Maria Amparo Calatayud Salom\*, Maria Serena Serra\*\**

**Author information**

\*      DPTO Didactica y Organización Escolar - Facultad de Filosofia y Ciencias de la Educación. Universitat de Valencia, Spain. Email: amparo.calatayud@uv.es

\*\*      PhD Student – Programa de Doctorado en Educación, Facultad de Filosofía y Ciencias de la Educación. Universitat de Valencia, Spain. Email: semase@alumni.uv.es

**HOW TO CITE**

# The Acquisition of Reading and Writing Skills in Italy and Spain: a Bibliographic Review

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*Abstract*: A common educational question in Southern Europe contexts is related to the difficulties in acquisition of reading and writing skills. Why are students finding problems in acquiring these skills? What can be done to improve their potential? What do scholars propose? How can elements at the basis of an effective understanding, wsuch as motivation and reader's and writer's belief, be measured? Can the hybridization of processes lead to better results than the current ones? The aim of this study is to provide an overview of the most recent studies on these problems. Starting from the studies carried out by Steve Graham (Graham, et al., 2018), the attentions to motivational aspects and the hybridization of the processes, are considered the new frontier of investigation on the subjects in question. The attention to these issues has been analyzed on an international scene, in Spain and Italy. This bibliographic review is divided into three parts: the first presents International studies, the second Spanish studies and the third Italian studies. It is part of a wider research for a didactic intervention aimed at improving reading and writing skills of Italian students, still in the experimental phase, within the limits of a well-defined territorial experience.

*Keywords:* education, bibliographic revision, methodological approaches, reading and writing processes

## Introduction

The most recent academic literature recognizes and investigates the great potential of the combined use of both reading and writing skills (Sole, et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2017; Mar Mateos et al., 2018).

Complex tasks place students before simultaneous problems of content and rhetoric, which must be solved with processes of understanding, integration and processing according to what is called Knowledge traforming, opposed to Knowledge telling, typical of inexperienced writers (Bereiter & Scardmalia, 1987).

Theoretical models underpinned in current researches, with a sociocultural matrix and a strong focus on socioconstructivism, take into account the processes that underlie the two skills, considering the general, meta-cognitive, procedural and pragmatic knowledge necessary to read and write (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000), allowing the reader and the writer to measure themselves against authentic tasks of reality, well placed in a specific context.

For instance, inspiring the writer's interest in the mechanisms which can make his writing effective and efficient - rather than towards a single topic - is a strategy that offers valuable possibilities of improvement. It is hence used in all fields of study, and greatly reduces the unpleasant feeling of "not knowing how to write", typical of those who fail to achieve the objectives of writing.

The Copernican revolution of the paradigm is from 'It's easy to write about what interests you' to 'it's easy to write if you know how to do it' (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007).

Thus, another director of the recently developed theoretical studies, which fits in with the above, is the one that considers the motivational aspects of the user with regard to both reading and writing tasks: the motivational approach considers the reader's and writer's belief, and proposes self - regulated learning models that consider the active role of learners in the regulation of their learning performance (Meneghetti & De Beni, 2010).

Great attention is thus paid to summarizing, a complex task in which different factors and different skills come into play. The summary is configured as a learning tool, a rhetorical exercise in modelling and constructing text, an element on which to measure and improve ourselves.

Regarding Italian studies, it is worth underlining the difficulties concerning the idea of evaluation understood as a measurement tool, which is certainly a highly formative moment if managed with a view to improvement (Boscolo, 2016).

This bibliographic review gives an overview of the researches carried out on the difficulties in the acquisition of reading and writing skills, with a

particular interest in motivational aspects and hybridization of processes. From here, a number of questions arise, which ask to be subject of debate and research, also at a socio-educational level: What can be done to improve the potential of students who are finding problems in acquiring reading and writing skills? What do the scholars who dealt with the issue propose? How to measure motivation and reader and writer beliefs, elements at the basis of an effective understanding? Can the hybridization of processes lead to better results than the current ones? This work could be seen framework, albeit limited, that wants to introduce to this problem, as a starting point. Debating and analysing, also from a socio-educational point of view, could perhaps lead us to new solutions to share.

## Method

The present bibliographic revision is part of a wider research for a didactic intervention, aimed at improving reading and writing skills of Italian students, still in the experimental phase, within the limits of a well-defined territorial experience. Working in the classroom, knowing the difficulties of the students and verifying the presence of difficulties in reading and writing skills in pre-adolescent students, has led the writer to seek for problem analysis and solutions in the academic literature. The research started from the works of Cisotto (Cisotto, 2006), and then followed the guidelines indicated by the keywords that identify the problems analyzed. Several electronic databases, including SCOPUS and ERIC, were mainly used to search for relevant documentation. The keywords used at the beginning of the research were the following: writing, reading, instruction, meta - analysis, handwriting, spelling, reading and writing processes, self - regulation, control, calibration, motivation, achievement, as well as the names of the authors mentioned in the most relevant and recent results.

The articles selected for this literature review are mainly based on empirical research. Most of the articles examined describe case studies that used a variety of data sources.

After selecting the most recent and relevant articles, further articles were identified following the references mentioned in the articles examined. The complete bibliography can be found at the end of this paper.

In addition to the examination of the most relevant studies in the international field, a geographical criterion was used, which included a more in-depth analysis of the Spanish and Italian studies. The division into three sections - International, Spanish, and Italian studies - is presented in the Theoretical Basics. A table of the work analysed is proposed below in order to provide a summary of the overview outlined.

Table 1. Summary of the works analysed

| Title | Authos - Year | Descriptions |
|---|---|---|
| *Reading for Writing: A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Reading Interventions on Writing.* | *Graham, S., Liu, X., Bartlett, B., Ng, C., Harris, K. R., Aitken, A., Talukdar, J. (2018)* | *The study observes the impact that didactic interventions on reading have on the writing skills of the students; the aim is to verify whether such interventions are able to enhance students' writing skills.* |
| *The impact of supplemental handwriting and spelling instruction with first grade students who do not acquire transcription skills as rapidly as peers: a randomized control trial.* | *Graham, S., Harris, K. R., Adkins, M. (2018)* | *The study examines the impact that additional spelling and "handwriting" instructions have on young students who do not acquire transcription skills as quickly as their peers.* |
| *Effectiveness of literacy programs balancing reading and writing instruction: A Meta-Analysis.* | Graham, S., Liu, X., Aitken, A., Ng, C., Bartlett, B., Harris, K. R. & Holzapfel, J. (2017). | *The study examines the improvements achieved by intervention programs that balance the indications on reading and writing, with an integrated approach - no more than 60% of instructions are given on either skill.* |
| *Development and initial validation of a questionnaire to assess the reading beliefs of undergraduate students: the Cuestionario de Creencias sobre la Lectura.* | Lordán, E., Solé, I., Beltran, F. S. (2017) | The aim of this study is to develop a new questionnaire aimed at exploring university students' conceptions of reading, since the existing tools have conceptual and methodological limitations. |
| Flexible self-regulated reading as a cue for deep comprehension: evidence from online and offline measures. | Minguela, M., Solé, I. & Pieschl, S. (2015) | The study examines how the different facets of a self-regulating approach to reading influence the understanding of texts by experienced and less experienced readers. |
| Improving Written Argumentative Synthesis by Teaching the Integration of Conflicting Information from Multiple Sources. | Mar Mateos, Elena Martín, Isabel Cuevas, Ruth Villalón, Isabel Martínez & Jara González-Lamas (2018) | This study verifies the effectiveness of two types of intervention aimed at improving the level of integration in an argumentative text, based on the reading of two sources that present points of view on the subject in contrast with each other. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Concepciones del alumnado de secundaria y universidad sobre la escritura académica. | Ruth Villalón & Mar Mateos (2009) | The study shows interesting points for reflection regarding the concept of "writer belief". In addition to an exposition of the experiment conducted, the work describes in a very effective way its theoretical landscape of reference, working on a pleasant excursus. |
| Integrating Information: An Analysis of the Processes Involved and the Products Generated in a Written Synthesis Task. | Sole, I., Miras, M., Castells, N., Espino, S. & Minguela, M. (2013) | This study is a qualitative one, It analyzes the production of written syntheses - considered hybrid tasks with a high learning potential. |
| Le prove INVALSI, ovvero: il difficile cammino della scuola verso una cultura della valutazione e dell'apprendimento. | Pietro Boscolo (2016) | This work clearly illustrates the difficulties encountered in carrying out the INVALSI tests in Italy. |
| What Makes a Good Student? How Emotions, Self-Regulated Learning, and Motivation Contribute to Academic Achievement. | Carolina Mega, Lucia Ronconi, and Rossana De Beni (2014). | In this work is presented a theoretical model in which emotions, self-regulated learning and motivation are related in order to achieve academic success. |
| Influence of motivational beliefs and strategies on recall task performance in elementary, middle and high school students. | Chiara Meneghetti & Rossana De Beni (2010). | This study is aimed at testing a model that describes the influence of motivational belief on the study performance of students attending different school orders. |
| The multiple meaning of motivation to write. | Pietro Boscolo and Suzanne Hidi (2007) | It provides an excursus, starting in the 1970s, on motivational research in the international field. |

The article then consists of two further sections: Results and Discussion, in which the practices set out in the studies examined will be discussed in general; and Conclusions, the final section that illustrates the general characteristics of the intervention that will follow this bibliographic review, as well as considering potential future developments.

## Theoretical Basics

### International Studies

The first recently published study examined by Graham, Liu, Bartlett, Ng, Harris, Aitken, Talukdar (2018) is part of the socio-cultural studies which consider the attention to motivational aspects and the hybridization of the pro-

cesses of reading and writing the new frontier of investigation on the subject in question.

The study, in which Australian, Chinese and American scholars have participated, observes the impact that didactic interventions on reading have on the writing skills of the students; the aim is to verify whether such interventions are able to enhance students' writing skills.

Meta - analysis carried out have already shown that educational intervention on writing improves students' reading skills (Graham & Hebert, 2011). In this research, the authors examine a parallel intervention on reading aimed at improving writing performance.

The starting point of this paper is a lucid metaphor that illustrates the relationship between reading and writing as "two buckets drawing water from a common well or two buildings built on the same foundations" (Shanahan, 2016); both skills draw from the same source of knowledge, improving the processes related to one of the two means and improving performance in the other.

The preface of this research also illustrates the four types of knowledge that reading and writing share as a common basis, according to Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000):

- Domain Knowledge: general knowledge on the subject.

The reader relies on it in order to understand what he/she is reading, whereas the writer uses it as a source of ideas.

- Meta-Knowledge about written language.

In using this kind of knowledge, readers and writers reflect on the functions and purposes of the written language as well as on the interaction between the writer and the reader. This reflection helps them to interpret an author's message and build their message in a way that is understandable.

- Procedural Knowledge.

It implies a knowledge of different types of procedures: access to information, formulation of functional questions to the work in progress, analysis, synthesis, visualization of the objectives to be achieved. This knowledge is useful for readers to give meaning to what they read, for writers to finalize and model their work.

- Pragmatic Knowledge.

It is the knowledge of the characteristics of a text: words, syntax and purpose. Writers and readers use it to encode / decode words and to build / understand sentences or larger units of text.

The experimental part of the article illustrates how students' writing skills improve with:

1.    Reading interventions (54 experiments; 5,018 students) in which students are taught reading techniques: "Does teaching reading enhance writing performance?" (Grahamet al., 2018).

2.     Interventions (36 investigations; 3,060 students) in which the interaction of students with words or text is increased through reading or the observation of other readers whilst reading "Does increasing students' interaction with words or text through reading or observing others read enhance writing performance?" (Graham et al., 2018).

The results obtained statistically show significant effects, and support the theory that interventions on reading skills lead to important improvements in students' writing performance.

Whilst Steve Graham and his team focused on the usefulness of writing literacy in the study described above, in their second paper (Graham, Harris & Adkins, 2018) they analyse writing skills. Specifically, they examine the impact that additional spelling and "handwriting" instructions have on young students who do not acquire transcription skills as quickly as their peers.

This study focuses on improving students' skills and offers some very useful definitions about the processes in place and the procedures to be implemented.

Writing is a complex and stimulating activity, which brings into play very challenging cognitive activities for those who compose a text: an idea must be generated and evaluated in its appropriateness in order to be set, then modelled in its grammatical correctness and transcribed with the right spelling. The final product will be a sentence that reflects the author's intention, which will be understood by listeners, which is finally appropriate for the writing community and for the addressee for whom it was created (Graham, Harris & Adkins, 2018).

Children find writing a stimulating activity, even if they approach it in a very simply way: they are not aware of the processes underlying writing, and their approach to it is often reduced to telling their knowledge on a subject. This, however, implies an unconscious processing of the ideas to be presented.

For these writers, however, transcription is slow and laborious, and requires a further cognitive effort, which interferes with the processes already generated, monitor and evaluate ideas, which can be lost before they are even fixed on paper.

In particular, some of them acquire the ability to transcribe more slowly than their peers; the difficulties encountered can result in wanting to avoid writing where possible or in the belief that they cannot write.

In the experimentation, thirty students (16 boys, 14 girls) are randomly divided into two groups on which to intervene in a separate way. The first group is given explicit additional indications of writing and spelling; the second group is given only indications to improve phonological awareness (based on the Anglo-Saxon nature of the users).

Every student in the first group is given 16 hours of individual instructions, aimed at improving the smoothness of manual writing in children, knowledge and accuracy of spelling.

Compared to the second group, the students who received additional individual instructions greatly improved the smoothness of manual writing, as well as the accuracy of spelling. Improvements were also noticed in sentence construction skills and vocabulary; however, the length and quality of written compositions did not improve.

These discoveries provide partial support for the theoretical proposal that considers text transcription skills to be randomly related to writing.

Further on, this study shows that explicit additional indications of writing and spelling play an important role in teaching writing skills to students who acquire these skills more slowly than the others.

Another interesting study is Graham, Liu, Aitken, Ng, Bartlett, Harris & Holzapfel, (2017).

Reading and writing are fundamental skills on which educational, work and daily life success depend on. Students use reading to acquire information from a variety of sources, while writing is used to refine and promote what they know.

Despite their importance, many young people do not fully acquire these literacy skills necessary to succeed in an increasingly complex world. One of the approaches supported by the most recent research is the one which considers a support provided to the two skills from an integrated point of view, i.e. reading and writing skills.

The theoretical models on the relationship between reading and writing provide a perspective which consider how instructions about the two skills can work in sync in order to facilitate the improvement of both.

The aforementioned Shanahan theory on the four types of knowledge is the first model (Shanahan, 2016); work indications formulated in order to enhance each of the different types of knowledge, especially if formulated by combining the two skills, can provide positive results in both fields (Graham & Santangelo, 2014).

A second theoretical model to support the stated perspective is the Theory of Rhetorical Relationships (Nelson & Calfee, 1998; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). Socioculturally oriented, this theory conceptualizes reading and writing as functions of the writer-reader relationship.

Consequently, the purpose of both is communication, and effective communication in each of the two fields implies specific processes that affect each other.

The model, therefore, suggests a sort of continuous conversation between the two abilities: if on the one hand the writer, while reading, can acquire the contents to be exposed and finds in what he reads the shared rules that are the basis of the written composition, on the other hand, the reader, while writing, manages to transmit his message because he builds up his own writing using

those structures found in the productions of other writers. A thought, therefore, transversal to both abilities.

Moreover, a third model to support the link between reading and writing is the Theory of functional relations (Langer & Applebee, 1987; Shanahan, 2006). According to this theory, reading and writing are two separate skills that must be used together to solve a specific problem or to perform a specific task. The basic assumption is that performance is better when reading and writing are used together in order to achieve a goal.

This study examines the improvements achieved by intervention programs that balance the indications on reading and writing, with an integrated approach.

The two reasons that scholars have investigated are well exposed: firstly, current theoretical models on the relationship between reading and writing suggest that an integrated approach to the two skills allows improvements to be made in both. Secondly, although previous research has shown that reading indications improve students' writing skills (Graham et al., 2018) and that writing indications improve students' reading skills (Graham & Herbert, 2011), these studies do not examine the effects of an education programme that combines these two interventions by calibrating the emphasis placed on each of the skills.

The intervention showed improvements in students' reading, resulting in statistically significant outcomes in decoding, understanding and widening vocabulary. There have also been improvements in the mechanics and quality of writing. The intervention therefore showed that the two skills can be learned together profitably, and that integrated intervention programmes on them strengthen them both.

### Spanish Studies

The first research examined among Spanish language studies is Lordán, Solé, Beltran, (2017). The aim of this very recent study is to develop a new questionnaire aimed at exploring university students' conceptions of reading, since the existing tools have conceptual and methodological limitations.

Furthermore, the previous work to which the authors refer is the questionnaire previously developed by Schraw & Bruning (1996; 1999), called Reader Belief Inventory (RBI).

Schraw & Bruning (1996) present two implicit reading models: Transmission model & Transaction model. The Transmission model sees reading as a one-way process in which the reader receives the author's message in the text, assuming the role of a passive reader who is marginally involved in the reading process.

The Transactional model, based on Rosenblatt's Reader response theory (1978; 2004), conceives reading as a dynamic process in which the reader is ac-

tively involved in developing his own complex representation of the meaning of the text. Meaning already exists in the reader's mind; representation must be constructed by establishing relationships between the text and the reader's knowledge.

However, the questionnaire developed by Schraw & Bruning on these theoretical premises presents, according to the authors of this research, some limitations.

In conceptual terms, the transaction model is more focused on the experience of the text that the reader makes rather than on the construction of meaning through interaction with the text. It omits key elements such as metacognitive aspects (e.g. self-regulation) and pays little attention not only to the processes by which reading is planned and meaning constructed, but also to the uses and functions of reading itself.

Several methodological problems are also highlighted, such as the lack of statistically relevant results on the relationship between the transmission model and the low levels of reading and understanding based on the recognition of the main ideas.

Moreover, a Spanish version of the RBI showed that the reliability of the instrument is low; the specific steps followed in the construction of the scale are not explained and finally, the validity of the instrument has been tested only on students in the humanities area, limiting its validation to a small field of academic studies.

The article describes in detail the phases of construction, the content validation, the pilot study to verify its comprehensibility, the phase of exploratory analysis and confirmation of the internal structure of the new questionnaire proposed. The range of reference on the reading belief is delimited by two different points of view: at one extreme, the reproductive point of view is introduced, linked to a simplified view of the reading; at the other extreme, the epistemic point of view is presented, which gives a complex view.

The result shows that reading belief is a complex construct, characterized mainly by six dimensions: the role of the reader, the role of the text, the nature of the reading process, the need to establish and keep in mind a reading objective by planning the process on this basis, and finally, the role of writing as a support to understanding during reading.

It also shows how the two types of reading believes - epistemic and reproductive - are not connected; a result in line with previous research on the subject.

Beyond the limitations of an exploratory study, this work contributes to the identification of the variables that influence understanding, and offers a new starting point for research in this field.

A further study (Minguela, Solé & Pieschl, 2015), examines how the different facets of a self-regulating approach to reading influence the understand-

ing of texts by both experienced and less experienced readers. The analysis is conducted throughout the reading processes of 55 students aged between 15 and 16.

The article therefore investigates the potential of a theoretical model, the self - regulated learning model (SRL), based on metacognition and studies on the use of strategies that intervene in reading processes. It also provides a lucid overview that illustrates the theoretical background of this model and configures its fundamental characteristics.

Although many students show difficulties in coping with complex texts or tasks, there is no doubt that reading for deep understanding is a key competence for successful learning. However, there are few activities in the classroom that teach how to work in depth on texts; the main focus is on individual reading aimed at the literal reproduction of information.

According to some scholars (Goldman, Lawless & Manning, 2013), it is necessary to reach another level of understanding, which allows us to grasp the overall coherence of the text and build the meaning that the individual gives to it, going beyond the strict literal idea. This is possible by flexibly using strategies aimed at achieving one's objectives, examining one's own reading processes and even modifying, if necessary, the objectives set. To sum up, the expert reader must self-regulate the way in which he reads.

SRL models have different theoretical bases (Pintrich, 2004; Winne & Hadwin, 1998; Zimmerman, 2002), but they all converge on two key points: the importance of adaptation in learning processes and the relevance of metacognitive monitoring and control for the success of this adaptation.

Nelson and Narens (1990) provided us with a useful definition of monitoring and control: monitoring is understood as the self-evaluation of one's own learning processes and results; control is instead the regulation of the procedures used in order to obtain the results one has set for oneself.

It is believed that these two components of metacognition influence each other in reading; however, some individual variables (readers' comprehension skill) and of context (task complexity) can interfere in their functioning. The effects of these variables have been measured using different types of measurements, including online measures - carried out during reading - and offline measures - carried out before or after the process being studied.

The two measurements have rarely been used together to study the relationship between self-regulated reading control, monitoring and performance.

In this study, more and less experienced readers are asked to read an explanatory text and answer questions of basic and advanced understanding. Online measurements are then analysed in order to identify specific models used in reading processes; calibration is determined by measuring the safety of the participants' judgement using offline measurements. Three fundamental questions underlie the research:

- What is the approach of experienced and less experienced readers in reading an exhibition text? (online monitoring)

Four different procedures were used in the study: Linear reading and linear re-reading, linear reading with selective re-reading and re-reading during linear reading. As a result, more complex strategies are used by more experienced readers.

- How accurate are readers who are experienced and less experienced in judging their performance (offline monitoring)?

As expected, more experienced readers were less likely to judge their performance than less experienced readers.

- Is there a correlation between online and offline measurements of self-regulated reading, and how do you describe performance?

The two measurements are therefore correlated; this opens up interesting perspectives for future studies.

Additionally, the research by Mateos, Martín, Cuevas, Villalón, Martínez & González-Lamas (2018), concerns the production of written summaries integrating conflicting information from different sources, a complex task with great potential. According to the aforementioned researchers, it is necessary to have the ability to select ideas and correlate them with each other; it is also necessary to establish connections between the information of the various texts and finally, during this process, it is necessary to choose an argumentative line that allows to articulate, connect and organize ideas creating a new structure that gives meaning to the text (Spivey, 1997).

The instructions given to the students can influence the level of integration of different information; several studies prior to this have been structured in order to support and improve the students' argumentative writing skills by adopting different approaches: graphic representation elements, explicit instructions on writing strategies, collaborative argumentation.

This study verifies the effectiveness of two types of intervention aimed at improving the level of integration in an argumentative text, based on the reading of two sources that present points of view on the subject in contrast with each other.

Students should construct an argument using divergent information. Only two sources are provided with the aim of teaching students how to bypass the temptation of taking one of the two positions: a conclusion that suggests new perspectives should be reached.

Two interventions are planned: on a first group the intervention works with guided collaborative practices (CPG) that adopt a dialogical approach. On the second group, in addition to the guided collaborative practices (CPG), explicit instructions are given on the writing strategies (CPG+EI) to be used in carrying out the task.

It is assumed that the global level of integration improves considerably in the second group (CPG+EI); the main evaluation criterion is in fact based on the global level of integration, since the ultimate aim of this intervention is precisely to teach the students this ability.

Secondly, it is expected that the intervention will lead to an increase in the arguments used in the text; is easier to argue more completely if the strategies to be used are made explicit.

Finally, a better evaluation of the intervention in the second group (CPG+EI) is expected; the more structured intervention used in this group can in fact help these students more than their peers in the first group.

For all three hypotheses mentioned, the results are in line with the expectations.

The study by Villalón and Mar Mateos (2009) shows interesting points for reflection regarding the concept of the "writer's belief".

In addition to a very clear exposition of the experiment conducted, the work analyzed here describes in a very effective way its theoretical landscape of reference, working on a pleasant excursus that starts from Bereiter and Scardmalia (1987) with the contrast between saying and transforming knowledge.

Followed by Levin and Wagner (2006) and the dichotomous visions of writing as closed space and open space. Then Schraw (2000), White and Bruning (2005), who investigated the implicit convictions on writing and applied their model that opposes the concept of transmission to the transactional one.

The model used in this study considers the writer's belief as implicit theories (Pozo et al., 2006). Given the two poles of implicit and explicit knowledge, the beliefs built upon writing take shape in a continuum that goes from one pole to another; in practice, these beliefs are made up of implicit hypotheses and principles, sometimes disjointed, of which we become fully aware when we are asked to record them in response to specific questions. This theory follows in the footsteps of the work of White and Bruning (2005).

The authors use a questionnaire on a Likert scale, which indirectly accesses the concepts of writing. Students show their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements concerning the writing. They are not obliged to support a dichotomous view of writing. Two forms of conception of writing are proposed: the reproductive conception, more similar to "saying knowledge" and the epistemic conception, or "transforming knowledge".

Specifically, it is pointed out that, although university students have a very complex and detailed conception of writing compared to the ideas of high school students, neither of the two samples examined manages to achieve a full and complete epistemic conception of writing.

The study is configured as an exploratory work for further in-depth study in Spain.

In particular, the authors argue for the need to stimulate reflection that leads students to a more epistemic and less reproductive conceptions of writing.

This reflection should be carried out above all through concrete tasks, transversal to all disciplines, which increasingly require the transformation of contents rather than the mere reproduction of them.

Furthermore, the analysis conducted in the research of Sole, Miras, Castells, Espino & Minguela, (2013), is a qualitative study, which allows a deep understanding of the processes underlying the ability to read and write. It analyzes the production of written syntheses - considered hybrid tasks with a high learning potential, according to the most recent research - placing the emphasis on both skills, considering both moments of reading and writing.

In the case of complex tasks, students have to deal with different and simultaneous issues:
- What to say, taking into account what I have read?
- How to say it, by inserting my voice among the ones I have listened to?

According to a great number of scholars "Knowledge transforming" always comes into play (Bereiter & Scardmalia, 1987); this transformation of knowledge is configured as a process in which cognitive faculties intervene, together with the conceptions that the reader/author has about reading and writing, comprehension activities, integration, re-elaboration and elaboration of new scenarios, connections and intra / extra-textual inferences.

A qualitative study is able, due to its nature, to investigate these steps more deeply, to pay more attention to their characteristics often unexplored.

10 students aged between 15 and 16 were asked to produce a written summary of three history texts concerning the impact of foreign intervention on the development and end of the Spanish Civil War. The study examines in detail the processes of knowledge integration that take place in a task of written synthesis.

The result suggests a general trend according to which, students who have carried out more articulated and complex comprehension processes, have managed to write tasks in line with the instructions. The papers, on the other hand, proved to be insufficient in cases where students adopted simpler, more linear and direct working methods, unsuitable to carry out demanding tasks such as the drafting of a summary.

Finally, the most valid works have been those elaborated after a diversified use of re-reading as a tool for understanding and selecting information.

It is interesting to note that those who have carried out the least qualified jobs, have considered sufficient a single reading of the proposed texts for the production of the task.

A very simplified approach to textualisation was also noted: the students started writing without any planning.

The most important contribution of this research to the studies is to have provided new information useful to understand the processes of reading and writing involved in the performance of hybrid tasks, allowing to identify any points of intervention.

### Italian Studies

The work of Boscolo (2016) clearly illustrates the difficulties encountered in carrying out the INVALSI tests in Italy. The INVALSI tests are part of the broader framework of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) programmes in Italy; the level of students in Italian and Mathematics-Geometry are measured.

Invalsi tests were introduced in the Italian school system in 2001 and have reached different levels in the following years. These tests allow Italy to fit into the context of the "global culture of testing" (Smith, 2016), although the Italian school system is reluctant to accept the challenges and new perspectives.

The objectivity of standardized tests highlights gaps in the learning of the two disciplines, with an inevitable focus on teachers' skills and school leaders: the accountability, the responsibility to make decisions related to the education process is involved in this discussion. Schools must report to their stakeholders and measure their educational effectiveness.

Yet, this culture of testing, assessment and accountability seems to have encountered many difficulties in Italy; it does not obtain full recognition and it is often considered unnecessary.

In this essay, Pietro Boscolo analyses its path by proposing an analysis of the concept of evaluation culture. He then considers the structure of the tests in relation to the tasks of reading and comprehension and proposes a further development.

It is interesting to note that the author, in order to better explain the purpose of the tests, places the emphasis on assessment Vs the concept of evaluation: the semantic perfection of the English language allows us to clear the field of any ambiguity and gives us back the real nature of the tests: a measurement tool released from the evaluation that allows us to plan the necessary training interventions.

And again, it investigates the characteristics that differentiate formative and summative evaluation, the assessment for learning from the assessment of learning, complementary and consequential among them, but well distinct in the processes.

According to the author, the limits of the Invalsi comprehension test are due to the nature of these tests, structured as reading tests. There is a lack of writing tasks in order to verify the control of the planning and cognitive processes of the students. The summary is then proposed as the most easily

achievable written production in a standardized test, in order to verify the ability to grasp the "global meaning".

How to achieve academic success? Which emotional and motivational components come into play in the self-regulated learning process? How do they influence it?

The study conducted in this article (Mega, Ronconi & De Beni 2014) tries to answer the questions listed above. A theoretical model is presented in which emotions, self-regulated learning and motivation are related in order to achieve academic success.

Self-regulated learning is in the active role of the student, who builds it using cognitive and metacognitive strategies to control and regulate processes. The self-regulating student not only tries to do his or her job optimally, but is also attentive to his or her needs and wants to have a good knowledge acquisition experience.

For this student, learning is a controllable process, in which you can constantly plan, organize, monitor and evaluate your progress (Ley &Young, 1998).

Here assume that the indicators of self-regulated learning are:

- Organisation: refers to the ability to manage time, to know how to scan it for different activities (Ley & Young, 1998; Pintrich, 2004).
- Processing: the ability to synthesize, to create analogies, to take notes in a profitable way (Warr & Downing, 2000).
- Self-assessment: a high level of self-awareness, including the ability to examine one's own culture and performance (Van Etten, Freebern & Pressley, 1997).
- Strategies for preparing for a university exam: for example, knowing how to evaluate what you have learned in a conference, through the use of questions about the material in your possession (Ruban et al., 2003).
- Metacognition: it is the monitoring of one's own ideas, the evaluation of the appropriateness of the procedures used and the identification of potential errors (Dinsmore, Alexander & Loughlin, 2008; Sperling et al., 2004).

Dweck's sociocognitivist theory of motivation (1999) analyses the implicit theories that students have about the nature of intelligence. Two theories are identified: incremental theory, which conceives intelligence as a malleable quality, and Entity theory, on the other hand, considers intelligence as a fixed and uncontrollable trait.

It follows that the so-called academic self-efficacy is typical of those students who believe that they can perform in a positive way the academic tasks assigned to them (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1991).

The theory on the achievement of objectives has been extensively analysed in educational psychology. Achieving one's goals is the aim that each student pursues; the two variants that show the difference between developing and

demonstrating one's competence are considered (Mastery approach vs. performance approach).

According to control - value theory (Pekrun et al., 2007), students' emotions influence the self-regulation of their learning and motivation, and consequently reflect on academic success.

Thus, does self-regulated learning and motivation mediate the effect of emotions on academic success? It does, indeed. The results obtained point out that, for example, only positive attitude to study, without self-regulated learning and motivation, is not enough to achieve one's goals.
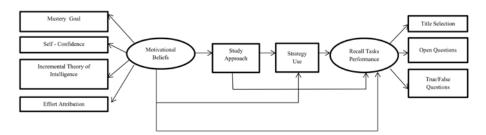
Proceeding with the analysis, the study by Meneghetti and De Beni (2010) is aimed at testing a model that describes the influence of motivational belief on the study performance of students attending different school orders: elementary school (8 - 10 years), middle school (11 - 14) and first year of high school (15 years).

The relationship between motivational belief, study strategies and the performance of memorization tasks is explored, with the hypothesis that motivational belief influences study performance through the strategies used. The nature of this relationship and its variability in students at different school levels is also analysed.

Students are tested with a battery of tests called AMOS 8-15, which verifies ability and motivation to study (Abilities and MOtivation to Study), developed by Cornoldi et al. (2005).

Initially, the theoretical model of reference is tested, which relates the different components of the Motivational Belief, (mastery goal, self-confidence, incremental theory of intelligence, and effort attribution), approach to the study, use of strategies and performance illustrated in detail in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Meneghetti & De Beni, 2010.



Secondly, the differences in these relationships in the different school orders are tested.

Elementary school students find themselves in an exploratory phase: they are learning to learn and apply study strategies; they do not have the idea that their beliefs influence learning.

From middle school onwards, and especially in high schools, the circuit described above has been consolidated, also thanks to the ever-increasing demand for the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills necessary for the more complex study load.

The results of the study confirm the model offering considerable input in the didactic field, with regard to teaching strategies and organizational choices.

In primary school, students need to be provided with the necessary basis to become aware of their motivational belief and how it can help them to develop positive strategies. During the middle school years, the link between motivational belief and learning strategies must be strengthened to make students' performance more efficient. In high school, this positive circuit must also be strengthened to compensate for the decline in performance, typical of adolescents.

Finally, the publication examined here (Boscolo & Hidi, 2007) is a sort of introductory chapter to a collection of studies, "Studies in Writing", which collects research work on writing in that moment. It dates back to 2007, and yet it is a unique piece of work taken into consideration to draw up the theoretical foundations of this thesis.

It provides a wide-ranging excursus, starting in the 1970s, on motivational research in the international field. It focuses on one of the most important aspects of the learning process, motivation.

If the studies previously examined account for the most recent implications, this work allows to know the roots of this line of research, and then it is worth placing it in this context.

The authors want to clarify how motivation and writing are conceptualized and examine their relationship. Secondly, the aim of this article is to highlight the main areas of research in which the relationship between motivation and writing is investigated.

The motivational construct is classified by reference to three major areas of research.

The first concerns the reasons that activate the student's attitude - needs, values, interests and the so-called goal orientation, i.e. the predisposition to develop one's learning skills which can be of different types: aimed at individual improvement (Mastery), aimed at achieving a good performance (Performance), or rejection (Avoidance).

The second area concerns the writer's perception of his skills in relation to the difficulty of the task to be performed and the resources that the context offers. This representation - positive or negative - that both the experienced writer and the beginner can have of themselves is given by a multiplicity of factors: self-efficacy, self-conception and self-perception of their competence.

The third area concerns the strategies put in place by experienced and less experienced writers in dealing with a complex task: planning and adoption of metacognitive tools.

An overview of the complex conceptualization of writing from cognitivist and constructivist perspectives is also provided, including contributions aimed at understanding the loss of motivation.

it is also worth mentioning the paragraph which focuses on the contrast between Writing about an interesting topic versus Writing as an interesting activity; the focus on the difference between situational interest and individual interest. If the student finds himself or herself involved in a social activity that he conceives as significant, according to Hidi, Berndorff and Ainley (2002) it is possible to stimulate and maintain his or her interest with positive implications also in terms of performance.

Furthermore, the studies on Self - perception and Self - Regulation are listed, finally introducing the socio-constructivist perspective, the main director of the studies examined in this chapter.

## Results and discussions

In the first study, Steve Graham and his group focus on the usefulness of reading for writing, while in the second one they specifically analyse writing skills, by examining the impact that additional spelling and handwriting instructions have on students who do not acquire transcription skills as quickly as their peers. The third article analyzed provides a perspective which considers how indications of the two skills can work in sync to facilitate the improvement of both. The paper showed improvements in students' reading, resulting in statistically significant outcomes in decoding, understanding and widening their vocabulary.

Synthesis, hybrid tasks, hybridisation of reading and writing processes, decoding and integration of conflicting information: the potential of these didactic interventions is unanimously recognised in international studies as well as in those carried out in Spain and Italy. Graham et al., (2017), considers that instructions about the two skills can work in sync in order to facilitate the improvement of both; Mar Mateos et al., (2018), talks about synthesis as a complex task with a strong potential for fostering learning. Sole et al., (2013), in a qualitative study, highlight a correspondence between the quality of the processes and the final product: The most important contribution of this research is to have provided new information useful to understand the processes of reading and writing involved in the performance of hybrid tasks, allowing to identify any points of intervention. Boscolo (2016), States that the writing test is missing in the Invalsi tests, and believes that the most easily achievable form of written production in a standardised test seems

to be the summary, in order to ascertain the students' ability to identify the essential parts of a text to compose a single text.

Boscolo & Hidi (2007), provide a clear framework within which the motivational construct are outlined and analysed according to the research area that concerns the reasons that activate the student's attitude, clearly illustrated by Meneghetti & De Beni (2010). The motivational construct is also analysed by the Reading and Writing belief point of view, also debated in the works of Lordàn et al. (2017), Villalòn & Mar Mateos (2009), Mega et al. (2014). Finally, it is also worth looking at the work of Minguela et al. (2015) for a focus on self – regulated learning.

It can be seen that certain themes cross the most recent studies on the topics analysed, and the studies on hybrid tasks, motivation, self-regulated learning, are fully synchronized despite the diatopic variables considered. All scholars agree in considering the validity of hybrid tasks, as well as in placing the motivational construct at the base of a truly effective learning.

Looking, for example, at the works of Mega et al. (2014), in Italy and Lordàn et al. (2017), in Spain, a common denominator that moves in the same direction of research can be found, which identifies a close correlation between the reader's belief, motivation, self-regulated learning and academic success. The studies therefore confirm the importance of a positive approach to study, seen as a catalyst for achieving the objectives set.

As already mentioned, this bibliographic review is preliminary to a case study, aimed at improving the skills of students aged 11 to 13 years of a Sicilian school.

Taking its cue from the articles analysed in this bibliographic review, the intervention, a qualitative research necessarily characterized as research - action, includes an initial screening phase aimed at testing the motivational belief of students through the administration of the battery of tests AMOS 8 - 15.

In second instance, it focuses on the definition of the possibilities of writing understood as an interesting activity. Then the hybridisation of the processes of reading and writing will take place, to stimulate mutual improvement working on the four types of knowledge underlying the two skills.

The intervention also includes transcription tasks provided with additional spelling instructions with well-defined objectives aimed at expanding the vocabulary, improving decoding, understanding, mechanics and quality of writing.

About reading, the exercises are based on the transactional model and on the experience-based reader response, allowing readers to build their own complex representation of meaning by establishing relationships between their previous knowledge and the text. The stimulation of Self - regulated

learning is foreseen, taking into account the interaction between task complexity and reader comprehension.

Everything is framed in a perspective of measuring learning that considers assessment an essential moment of a precise evaluation.

## Conclusions

The difficulties in learning reading and writing skills, widely encountered by the OECD-PISA surveys, are one of the challenges to which the education systems of every country must try to respond with well-articulated solutions. In order to be able to intervene appropriately on the difficulties of individual students, it is necessary to take into account the context of belonging, personal identity and motivation of each individual. It is also possible to try to think about solutions shared between states, which respond to the same needs and allow effective interventions.

Can the sociology of education, in proposing solutions to the basic difficulties that persist in our countries despite the interventions carried out, nowadays encourage the fundamental role that the motivation to learn plays? Can it promote the diffusion of the concepts of writer's and reader's belief, self-regulated learning oriented to school success? Can it intervene, in dialogue with other disciplines, to develop new didactic perspectives? The widespread feeling is that functional illiteracy is reaching worrying heights. Our school systems are calling for solutions and perspectives to curb this far-reaching phenomenon and its disastrous consequences for society as a whole. The socio-cultural perspective, promoting a conception of writing as a system of skills and meanings culturally organized, learned in specific contexts and in interaction with others, allows to develop a didactic conception that takes into account the cultural, situated and interactive character of writing (Cisotto, 2015). Can we really improve our students' skills by working in this way?

The impact of the study will be evaluated as the research goes on; in this phase, however, it is important to underline the potential of the intervention which, due to its research-action nature, leads to various possibilities of further implementation. Hence, it is possible to evaluate the idea of further case studies in order to verify the effectiveness of the models examined in this bibliographic review.

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