Effetti inclusivi di un programma di otto settimane per lo sviluppo della competenza alfabetica-funzionale nel primo ciclo d'istruzione

Inclusive effects of an eight-week pilot program to teach literacy competence in primary and lower secondary school

Maurizio Gentile
Associate Professor of Didactics and Special Pedagogy, Department of Human Sciences, LUMSA University, m.gentile@lumsa.it

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses a project conducted in Italy during the 2023/2024 school year, that entailed the implementation and evaluation of an eight-week pilot program of integrated literacy activities (ILA). The model aims to enhance literacy competence among primary and lower secondary school students. The program addresses the multidimensional nature of literacy, recognising the reciprocal and complementary relationship between reading and writing skills. ILA were implemented in five schools across three different social contexts (*urban/small cities, suburban, and rural*), including three categories of students officially recognised as having *learning disabilities and disabilities*, and a *migration background*. The analyses revealed significant improvements in the quality and complexity of text production, consistent across various contexts and diverse student profiles. Students with SEN and those who initially exhibited lower text comprehension and production skills showed significant progress, highlighting the inclusive effect of the program. No statistically significant changes were observed in comprehension scores.

Lo studio discute un progetto condotto durante l'anno scolastico 2023/2024, volto a implementare e valutare un programma pilota di otto settimane di *attività integrate per la lettura e la scrittura* (AILS). Il modello mira a migliorare la competenza alfabetica funzionale tra gli studenti delle scuole primarie e secondarie di primo grado. Il programma è fondato sulla relazione reciproca tra le abilità di lettura e scrittura. La ricerca ha coinvolto cinque scuole appartenenti a tre diversi contesti sociali (urbani, suburbani e rurali), includendo studenti con difficoltà di apprendimento e disabilità certificate, e di cittadinanza non italiana. Le analisi hanno rivelato miglioramenti significativi nella qualità e nella complessità della produzione dei testi, trasversali ai vari contesti e profili individuali. Gli studenti con BES e con un livello iniziale di competenza più bassa hanno ottenuto progressi significativi, evidenziando l'effetto inclusivo del programma. Non sono stati osservati cambiamenti statisticamente significativi nei punteggi di comprensione.

Keywords: literacy competence, reading comprehension, writing, inclusion, quasi-experiment

Parole chiave: competenza alfabetica-funzionale, lettura-comprensione, scrittura, inclusione, quasi-esperimento

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Corresponding Author:
Maurizio Gentile, m.gentile@lumsa.it

1. Introduction

Literacy competency is the capacity to understand, express and interpret ideas, feelings, facts and opinions, both orally and in writing, using different types of materials and disciplines. It includes the ability to communicate effectively and creatively and is crucial for future language learning and interaction. It can develop in the mother tongue, the school language, or the official language of a country or region (Council of Europe, RACC, 2018/C 189/01). For reading and writing, competence is based on several aspects, including knowledge and understanding of written texts, vocabulary, functional grammar, and linguistic functions.

The framework proposed by the EU RACC 2018 encourages the integration of reading and writing, seen as closely related skills due to their common bases, including comprehension, textual production, background knowledge, and textual structures (Fitzgerald, Shanahan, 2000; Kintsch, 2013; Meyer, Ray, 2017). Studies show that writing on read texts improves comprehension, particularly when the writing focuses on analysis and synthesis (Graham, Hebert, 2011). The integration of these tasks is also effective for developing basic language skills and decoding (Snowling, Hulme, 2005), as evidenced by research on various school populations (Cho, Brutt-Griffler, 2015; Turcotte, Caron, 2020).

The article proposes the results of an eight-week program of integrated activities for reading and writing. We studied the effects of the program by comparing the scores obtained by pupils before and after the intervention. The following factors were examined: comprehension and production of the text, value attributed to reading and writing, and self-efficacy as readers and authors. The research questions were as follows:

- RQ1: Are there any differences in terms of increased scores in comprehension and text production after the eight-week intervention?
- RQ2: After the intervention, can it observe any differences in the perception of oneself as readers and authors of writings and in the value attributed to reading and writing?
- RQ3: To what extent do students with lower scores on cognitive tests improve their abilities after eight weeks, compared to peers with higher cognitive scores?
- RQ4: At the end of the intervention, what correlations are observed between the scores of the cognitive tests and the non-cognitive factors detected in the study?

2. Method

The study involved five schools, geographically distributed across the provinces of Rieti, Rome, and Latina, with a total of 22 experimental teachers and 320 pupils from 11 fifth-grade classes in primary school and eight third-grade classes in lower secondary school.

The project was divided into three phases. PHASE I and II were dedicated to the professional development of teachers, while PHASE III focused on the application of the integrated reading-writing program in the classroom, monitoring activities, and providing support to teachers, as well as evaluating the program's effects. The monitoring carried out in PHASE III indicated that the total time dedicated to the program in the five schools was 590 hours, with an average of 4.5 hours per week per teacher (Stragapede *et alii*, 2024).

2.1 *Teaching strategies and toolkit*

We proposed a mix of text and teaching strategies. The *text strategies* were borrowed from the work of Poletti and Pognante (2022) and aimed to support reading integrated with writing activities throughout experimentation. They are the notebook, the graphic organisers, and the short writings. To these the following *pedagogical components* have been added to the program: principles and techniques of formative assessment (Gentile, 2019); student-centered learning (Marzano *et alii*, 2001); principles and techniques of active and cooperative learning (Gentile, Chiappelli, 2016); integrated reading and writing approaches

(Teruggi, 2019; Gonnelli, Minuto, 2021; Poletti, Pognante, 2022); presentation of the neuro-cognitive correlates underlying the processes of reading, comprehension and writing (Cornoldi, 2023); evaluation of psycho-social factors related to learning (Gentile, Pisanu, 2023).

Based on these teaching and learning components, we have developed a toolkit comprising eight weeks of integrated activities for primary school and eight for middle school, accompanied by independent reading and rewriting of a text as weekly homework.

2.2 *Context and participants*

The study involved a total of 320 pupils from 19 classes in 5 schools across three provinces: Latina, Rieti, and Rome. The final analyses were carried out on a valid sample of 271 subjects since absences during administration and misalignments in the two surveys were considered (pupils absent in pre-test but absent in post-test and vice versa). Females comprised 49.1% of the sample, while males represented 50.9%, distributed across 11 primary classes and eight lower secondary classes. The neurotypical students were 78.6%, while students with learning disabilities were 8.1%, with an official decision of disability corresponding to 7.4%, and a migrant background to 5.9%.

It is well known that context can exert an influence on school performance (Agrusti, Asquini, Vannini, 2024); therefore, we considered it essential to check for any changes in the results, considering the differences in context. For this reason, the schools have been classified according to the degree of urbanisation of the territorial context to which they belong: "Urban", "Small cities and suburbs" or "Rural area".

2.3 *Research design*

The evaluation of the program's effects was conducted using a quasi-experimental single-group design, with two surveys administered (PRE/POST, October 2023/December 2023). Dependent variables (DVs) have been grouped into three general dimensions:

– DV 1 – Assessment of reading comprehension competence (aggregate score of correct answers);
– DV 2 – Evaluation of the competence of the text production (complexity, quality, productivity);
– DV 3 – Self-perception as readers/writers, perception of the value of reading/writing.

The reading and writing tests were counterbalanced between classes in the pre-test and post-test phases. Half of the classes took the narrative reading test during the pre-test and the informative reading test during the post-test, while the other half followed the reverse order. The same scheme was applied for the writing tests. This measure aimed to reduce the likelihood of bias related to the sequence of administrations.

The tests were conducted in the same order for all participants, and each test began only after everyone had completed the previous test. All data were collected in the classrooms under the supervision of two examiners involved in the project and the reference teacher. The administration of the tests took about 60 minutes.

2.4 *Measures*

All measures presented below were detected in both the pre-test and post-test phases, allowing for comparisons of changes following the educational intervention.

To assess *text comprehension*, two standardised tests were selected, one for each school grade, from the MT 3-4-5 package for primary school (Cornoldi, Colpo, Caretti, 2017a) and the MT 1-2-3 Kit for lower secondary school (Cornoldi, Colpo, Caretti, 2017b). A z-score ($z = (x - \mu) / \sigma$) was calculated for each student, where x represents the total score obtained (i.e. the sum of the correct answers), the sample mean and σ the standard deviation provided by the norms. This method of evaluation enabled the ranking of

students' performance against the sample average: scores below zero indicated below-average performance, while positive scores indicated above-average performance. Conventionally, performance below two standard deviations from the mean was considered significantly critical and indicative of difficulty in reading comprehension.

Regarding *text production*, the students were asked to write an expository essay based on two assignments specifically designed for each school level (Limpo, Alves, Connely, 2017). Assignment 1: "Do you think pupils should do their homework every day? Justify your answer." Assignment 2: "Do you think pupils should do extracurricular activities every day? Justify your answer." Students had 10 minutes to complete the test. Again, one of the two tracks was administered in the pre-test and the other in the post-test, with a counterbalance of the order of administration between classes. The texts produced were evaluated according to various parameters, including productivity, complexity and text quality. Productivity was measured in terms of the number of words and clauses, while complexity was assessed through specific structural elements: a) presence or absence of an introduction (1 if present, 0 if absent); b) number of reasons, i.e. reasons in support of the central thesis; c) number of elaborations, i.e. insights provided in support of the reasons; d) presence/absence of conclusion (1 if present, 0 if absent). This procedure follows the description in previous studies assessing textual complexity (Limpo, Alves, Connely, 2017). Finally, the quality of the text was evaluated based on two main parameters: the overall impression of the text and the relevance and richness of the vocabulary used. Both aspects were measured on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating low quality or poor use of vocabulary and 5 indicating high quality or rich and relevant use of vocabulary (Cornoldi, Ferrara, Re, 2022). The evaluation of the texts was conducted by two examiners, who discussed and agreed on the scores to be assigned to each parameter to ensure consistency and reliability in the evaluation.

For *self-perception as readers/writers, and the value of reading/writing*, a self-report questionnaire adapted by existing scales in the literature ("Me and My Reading Profile") was used (Marinak *et alii*, 2015). The items identified required participants to answer on a scale of 1 to 3, differentiated by question, where 1 indicates a low value and 3 a high value ("Learning to read is... / Learning to write is" "1 = Not very important", "2 = Somewhat important", "3 = Very important"). The items dedicated to self-efficacy are inspired by a tool used by Shell and colleagues (1995) and adapted to the classroom context ("I feel able to read and understand school texts", "I feel able to write invented stories"). Students rated their capability in performing reading or writing tasks on a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "not at all capable" and 4 representing "very capable".

2.5 *Analysis strategy*

The statistical analysis was conducted in four phases. First, a linear mixed model was used for each DVs. Pre-test/post-test results were treated as fixed effects, while participants were treated as random effects. This approach allows for the control of individual variations between subjects, isolating the effect of the two surveys on DVs. Subsequently, an ANOVA was conducted to obtain the values of F and p, aiming to determine the statistical significance of the fixed effect on each dependent variable.

A further level of analysis involved the inclusion of predictive variables such as school level ("Primary school" *versus* "Secondary school"), students' profile ("Students with SEN – WSES" *versus* "Students without SEN – WOBES") and grade of urbanisation ("Cities", "Small towns and suburbs", "Rural areas"), also including the interaction between DVs and predictors. These interactions were calculated to assess whether the improvement is generalisable for all students, regardless of school grade, individual profile, and social context. The results are expressed in terms of *F-values* derived from hierarchical models.

Subsequently, a cluster analysis (k-means) based on the scores of the pre-test cognitive performances was conducted to identify groups of students with different levels of competence. The comparison between groups was conducted in the post-test assessment using the same linear models to observe differences and any improvements based on the initial level of competence.

Finally, a correlation analysis (Pearson's r) made it possible to understand the covariations between cognitive results and self-perception, as well as reading/writing, detected in the post-test phase, to explore the associations between the different areas of competence and noncognitive factors.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the DVs considered, illustrating the results obtained in both the pre-test and post-test phases.

The results related to *reading comprehension* did not show a statistically significant improvement between the pre-test and post-test. On the contrary, in the *text production,* statistically significant results were achieved by comparing the differences in the two distributions using the mixed linear model. The pupils showed a significant improvement in the quality of the texts produced after the intervention. There was an increase in overall impression ($F = 42.67$, $p < 0.001$) and vocabulary quality ($F = 22.49$, $p < 0.001$). Textual complexity indices also showed improvements. In detail, a greater number of students were able to formulate coherent and structured conclusions in their texts ($F = 4.51$, $p > 0.05$).

Tab. 1: *Differences between pre and post-test outcomes: means and standard deviation*

	N = 271	
	Pre-test	Post-test
	M (DS)	M (DS)
Comprehension	-0.618 (1.05)	-0.723 (1.02)
Measures of text quality and complexity		
Overall impression	3.12 (0.90)	3.50 (0.87) ***
Vocabulary	3.16 (0.9)	3.45 (0.84) ***
Coherent conclusions	0.30 (0.56)	0.40 (0.64) *
Self-efficacy		
As reader	2.93 (0,531)	2.98 (0,555) *
As writer	2.91 (0,55)	2.98 (0,54) *
***$p < 0.001$ - * $p < 0.05$		

For each of the variables examined, these results confirm that the improvement was independent of school level (primary *versus* secondary), individual profile (WSEN *versus* WOSEN) and context (urban, small cities and suburban, rural).

Regarding self-perception, specifically the self-efficacy, the results show that both as readers and as text writers, pupils feel significantly more effective after the intervention (respectively, $F = 4.18$, $p < 0.05$ and $F = 4.91$, $p < 0.05$). Increased self-efficacy was observed in all student groups, regardless of grade level, profile, or context.

Instead, a composite and nuanced picture is presented in relation to the complexity and quality of the texts. Although there are no statistically significant values, WSEN students benefit from the intervention, showing improvements in both the quality (e.g., global impression, vocabulary) and complexity (e.g., presence/absence of conclusions) of the texts produced (Fig. 1a, b). For example, the increase in WOSEN classmates in vocabulary is equal to 0.29 points, a statistically significant value ($F = 14.20$, $p < 0.001$), just as, although both groups have grown in the quality of the texts, the WOSEN pupils improve by 0.40 points compared to the pre-test ($F = 25.1$, $p < 0.001$).

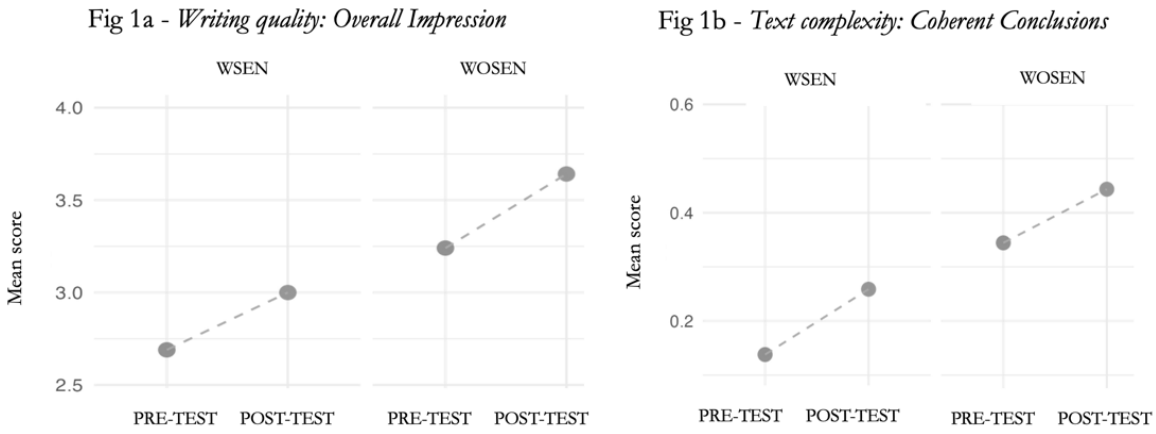

Fig. 1: *Differences between students with SEN (WSEN) and without SEN (WOSEN)*

The *k-means analysis* conducted on the cognitive scores of the pre-test made it possible to identify two general learning outcome profiles: students with lower performance, and students with higher performance in comprehension and production of texts (Fig. 2). The comparison between pre-test and post-test in relation to the two clusters made it possible to understand that students with a lower initial performance increased their skills more, in relation to the overall impression of the texts produced (t = 7.83, $p < 0.001$), the quality of vocabulary (t = 7.83, $p < 0.001$) and the textual complexity referred to the presence/absence of coherent conclusions (t = 4.05, $p < 0.001$) (Table 2).

Tab. 2: *Text production after the program: differences between students with low and high cognitive scores*

	Cluster 1 – N = 145 Students with lower scores		Cluster 2 – N = 118 Students with higher scores	
	Pre-test	*Post-test*	*Pre-test*	*Pre-test*
	M (DS)	M (DS)	M (DS)	M (DS)
Overall impression	2.62 (0.678)	3.23 (0.797)***	3.75 (0.742)	3.87 (0.822)
Vocabulary	2.74 (0.643)	3.17 (0.773)***	3.70 (0.799)	3.83 (0.743)
Coherent conclusions	0.10 (0.31)	0.24 (0.48)***	0.54 (0.70)	0.62 (0.75)
***$p < 0.001$				

Finally, Table 3 presents three positive and significant correlations: between reading comprehension scores and self-efficacy as readers ($r = 0.32$), between self-efficacy and the value attributed to reading ($r = 0.59$), and between the value attributed to reading and comprehension scores (r = 0.20). Similarly to the previous data, Table 4 presents positive and significant correlations between scores relating to the production of the text and self-efficacy as writers ("overall impression": $r = 0.20$, "quality of vocabulary" $r = 0.19$; "complexity", $r = 0.15$; "productivity" $r = 0.22$). Correlation data were collected during the post-test phase to obtain further descriptive evidence about the possible effects of the intervention.

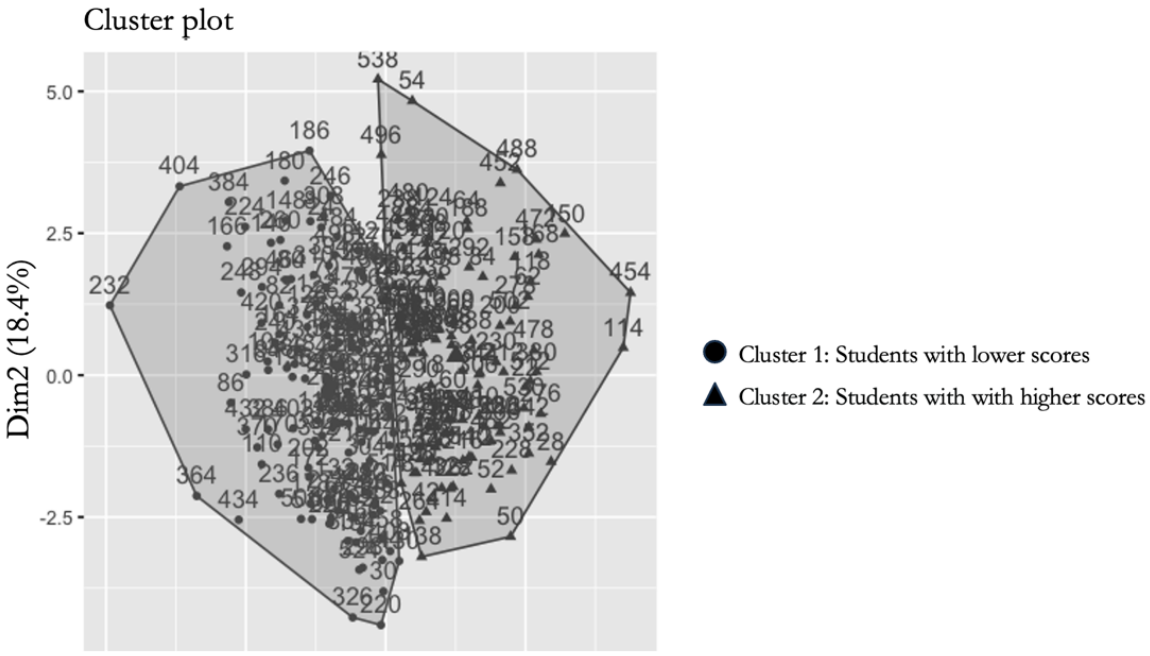

Fig. 2: *K-means analysis on cognitive scores collected in pre-test: two cluster solution*

Tab. 3: *Correlational matrix between non-cognitive factors and cognitive scores: reading comprehension*

	Self-efficacy	Value of reading	Comprehension scores
Self-efficacy	1.00		
Value of reading	0.59***	1.00	
Comprehension scores	0.32***	0.20***	1.00
***$p < 0.001$			

Tab. 4: *Correlational matrix between non-cognitive factors and cognitive scores: text production*

	Self-efficacy	Overall impression	Vocabulary	Complexity	Productivity
Self-efficacy	1.00				
Overall impression	0.20***	1.00			
Vocabulary	0.19**	0.79***	1.00		
Complexity	0.15*	0.59***	0.54***	1.00	
Productivity	0.22***	0.58***	0.52***	0.62***	1.00
***$p < 0.001$ - **$p < 0.01$ - *$p < 0.05$					

4. Conclusions

The integrated writing and reading program produced improvements in the quality and complexity of the students' texts production. Their self-efficacy in reading and writing has also increased, with greater confidence in their literacy skills. The positive impact was particularly evident in the most fragile students, suggesting that the ILA model fosters school inclusion. Socio-emotional and psychological variables, such as self-efficacy, remain important factors supporting learning processes (Gentile, Pisanu, 2023).

Despite the progress observed in writing, the model had no positive effect on text comprehension performance. This result is consistent with the existing literature where it is highlighted that the development of writing competence occurs in a relatively short time through targeted interventions (Graham, Hebert, 2011), while the reading comprehension requires longer and more complex interventions (Kintsch, 2013) affirming the interaction but not the uniformity in the learning of the two processes (Kim, Wolters, Lee,

2024). The eight-week period may have been insufficient, which would explain the lack of significant effects on text comprehension.

Probably, during the eight weeks, the value attributed to reading was mainly instrumental, limited to decoding and supporting writing activities. For this reason, the improvement of the program should include direct interventions to develop comprehension and learning skills from written texts (Gentile, 2017; Peng *et alii*, 2024), such as modelling strategies and guided/autonomous practice (Rosenshine, 2012). A possible solution could involve extending the program to 12 weeks. One of the possible patterns could be: four weeks addressed to comprehension, four weeks for textual production, and four weeks for integrating the two processes.

The current analyses have not considered the implementation process in the classrooms. In this regard, the monitoring results (Stragapede *et alii*, 2024) can be correlated with the changes observed in the classes. Although the average of 4.5 hours per week exceeded the researchers' expectations, variations within the group of experimental teachers in the number of hours dedicated to the program may have decisively influenced the results. In addition, teaching literacy competence in an integrated mode implies an instructional approach based on targeted planning, intentionality, and increased awareness among both students and teachers. It is entirely reasonable to hypothesise that these components can foster a deeper understanding of what is read, heard, and said (Williams *et alii*, 2014; Wolf, 2018).

Finally, it would be interesting to replicate the study with a larger and more representative sample, including, for example, randomised control groups. We consider necessary to integrate the analysis strategies by taking the perspective of differences in differences: examining, for example, not only pre- and post-intervention variations, but also considering the subpopulations and distinctive profiles of participants (Dee, Jacob, 2010).

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