

Unpacking the role of genre and word-level information in reading Hebrew

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Historically, reading research has predominantly focused on word-level processes. In recent years, however, there has been a notable shift towards examining text-level processes. Contemporary researchers recognize that while word reading skills provide a critical foundation for reading fluency, fluent text reading also requires the integration of syntactic parsing, contextual facilitation, and construction of meaning. Consequently, it is expected that texts varying in linguistic and cognitive complexity will elicit distinct reading behaviors. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that narrative and informational texts are processed differently. Specifically, reading pace tends to be significantly slower for informational texts compared to narratives. In contrast, findings regarding word recognition accuracy are mixed; some studies suggest that when texts are appropriately leveled, students decode words accurately regardless of genre. The present study aims to investigate the interplay between word-level and contextual-level factors across different stages of reading development. Specifically, we examine whether the effect of text genre on reading performance is moderated by modulating word-level information. Hebrew provides a unique opportunity to explore this question, as children encounter two orthographic systems during reading acquisition: transparent, pointed script (full vowel representation via letters and diacritic marks), used by novice readers, and unpointed script (partial and opaque vowel representation), adopted by more advanced readers. While vowel diacritics are essential for novices, proficient readers may also benefit from diacritics for improved accuracy. However, the additional phonological information provided by diacritics may also slow reading pace. A total of 261 typically developing, native Hebrew-speaking students from 2nd, 4th, and 6th grades read four texts (two narratives and two informative texts) encompassing both pointed and unpointed versions. Text transparency and text genre influenced accuracy and reading speed, though their effects varied across grade levels, demonstrating the changing relationship between bottom-up information (diacritics) and top-down information (context) throughout reading development in Hebrew.

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