The relationship between teaching styles and SEN students' reading comprehension achievement

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Abstract

The aim of the current study was to find out which are the characteristics that affect teachers' preference on specific teaching styles and whether students with Learning Disabilities are benefited by the use of specific teaching styles in the development of their reading comprehension skills. Seventeen English as a Foreign Language teachers and 309 students, 55 of which were identified as students with special educational needs (SEN), aged 9–11 years old, were participated in this study. A questionnaire consisting of four teaching scenarios, in order for teachers' preferred teaching style to be emerged, and a reading comprehension test, which sought to assess students' reading comprehension skill and their skill to draw conclusions based on the information given on the text, was given to the teachers and students, respectively. Results indicated a high teachers' preference for the suggestive teaching style when dealing with students with SEN in the mainstream classroom. Findings also showed that teaching styles have a significant impact on their students' competence of extracting meaning from written text. The most beneficial teaching style to students with SEN was the suggestive one.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, reading comprehension, special educational needs, teaching styles.

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1. Introduction

In today's educational setting there is a growing tendency towards co-educating students with special educational needs (SEN) with their typical peers in the general classroom (inclusive education). In this demanding context, these students strive not only to compete with their classmates but also to achieve the goals set by their teacher, which becomes even more challenging when it comes to learning the English language. In that case, the students experience a high level of anxiety and frustration, become demotivated and the learning process is being hindered. As a consequence, these children may manifest not only misconduct but also difficulty in carrying out tasks, following instructions and organising their thoughts (Bender, 2002). This may hinder their ability to comprehend what they read, as a large number of students with SEN exhibit difficulties in reading acquisition and more specifically, in comprehension of written material (Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007).

On the other hand, foreign language (FL) educators face the perplexing issue of how to assist students who struggle to acquire and master all the skills and strategies needed for learning an FL. Most FL teachers are aware of SEN and their ramifications and most of the times they are well informed about the techniques that can be used in the classroom, but they lack training that could help them both identify those students and teach them more effectively in order to help them learn the English language in an easier and most effective way for them. However, there are other important factors that play a vital role in being an effective teacher and helping students with SEN, enhance their self-esteem and motivation levels and thus make their learning meaningful and more effective. These factors involve not only having a deep content knowledge but also organisational, management and communication skills. The teacher is responsible for creating a warm climate in the classroom, for promoting an interactive student–teacher relationship by being caring and understandable and above all, he/she is responsible for enhancing learning acquisition.

Although a plethora of research has been conducted on techniques general teachers use in primary school to confront various learning disabilities (Bauwens, Hourcade & Friend, 1989; Bender, 2002), the case of teachers of the English language has been insufficiently investigated, as well as the impact that different teaching styles have on fostering reading comprehension skill in students with SEN. Bearing in mind the multidimensional aspects involved in teaching English as a Foreign Language to students with Learning Disabilities and their typical peers, this paper seeks to investigate the teaching styles FL teachers use to promote the successful development of the reading comprehension skills of students with SEN in an inclusive classroom environment. Two questions are of prime interest in this study; the first question is whether the use of teaching styles has an impact on SEN students' comprehension competence while the second question is which teaching style has the greatest impact and how it affects students' performance.

The research was carried out in the form of teaching scenarios that were handed out to 17 English language teachers of state primary schools and private schools, with at least one student with SEN in their classrooms. Furthermore, reading comprehension tests were handed out to their 309 students aged 9–11 years old as well, 55 of which were identified as students with SEN by public diagnostic centres across Greece.

Warnock (2005) maintains that although there are common educational goals towards all children, irrespective of their abilities and disabilities, some students discounter special difficulties trying to reach those goals, as every human has certain needs and difficulties. It is true that children learn in different ways and can have different levels of need, something that leads to a tendency to call any problem a child faces at school a learning problem (Katsiou – Zafrana, 2003) and the child is considered to have learning disabilities or SEN. As Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) state when a student does not respond to a program as the vast majority of his/her classmates does, then the inference is that the student's deficits render learning to challenge and he/she requires special education.

The term SEN, however, is an umbrella term used to describe one or more learning disabilities that prevent a student from making use of the educational facilities in the mainstream school, as it is

mentioned in the Department for Education, Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (2015, p. 15). According to that definition, *'a child or young person has SEN if he/she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for them'.* At any rate, the fact that SEN is such a broad term leads to multiple definitions that explain what SEN might be about. Root (1994) refers that SEN, along with other terms (learning disabilities, learning difficulties and additional educational needs), comprises a number of difficulties and disabilities that define a difficulty which interferes with a person's ability to store, process or produce information.

Students with SEN are possible to face many difficulties in the FL. Especially the English language, which is considered to be an opaque language, i.e. a language that presents inconsistencies in the representation at the grapheme–phoneme level (Miles, 2000) may cause additional problems to learners with SEN, especially when reading and writing are concerned. In other words, they may experience difficulties in the syntactic level, which is related to grammar and the way words are connected in a sentence, and the semantic level, which has to do with the meaning of words and the word parts. Furthermore, according to the Linguistic Coding Deficit Hypothesis, introduced by Sparks and Ganschow (1993) students with LD face identifiable coding problems in one or more linguistic codes (phonology, syntactic and semantic) when learning a FL. It is also added that learners who do poorly in the FL may have language problems in their native language that interfere with their ability to learn a FL, defining phonology or phonological decoding as a plausible area of difficulty.

Various researches have shown that the vast majority of students with SEN exhibit serious reading comprehension problems (Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes & Lipsey, 2000; Kavale & Reece, 1992), as reading can be characterised as a very complex process. Grabe (1991, p. 377) describes reading as an *'active process of comprehending where students need to be taught strategies to read more efficiently (e.g., guess from context, define expectations, make inferences about the text, skim ahead to fill in the context, etc.)'.* Although the reading skill is consisted of many important sub-skills, reading comprehension is considered the 'sine qua non' of reading (Beck & McKeown, 1998) as it is very important not only to know how to read words but also to construct meaning out of the text as well. So comprehension can be characterised the ultimate goal of reading. Reading comprehension is defined as a *'process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language'* (Snow, 2002, p. 11), a combination of identification and interpretation skills.

Wixson and Lipson (1991) state that reading requires the successful selection, application and monitoring of multiple strategies and students with LD have great difficulties acting on these requirements. They often demonstrate multiple problems associated with low comprehension, including poor decoding and fluency (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams & Baker, 2001). It is true that very few students need help to read the words on a page while their most common problem is not being able to comprehend what they read and thus slow down their reading and re-read the text in their effort to understand it. This way, they spend enough cognitive capacity trying to translate the spelling patterns of written words (decoding) and to read these words accurately (fluency), a process that does not allow them to concentrate on making meaning of the text (Klingner, Vaughn & Boardman, 2007; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Furthermore, students with LD have limited background knowledge for reading most texts, which may have a detrimental effect on their reading comprehension (Boss & Anders, 1990). Background knowledge does not only involve the topic at hand but also the familiarity of words used in the text, which helps students to determine their meaning, and the way they are used in a particular text (Anderson & Peaorson, 1984; Boss & Anders, 1990). According to the schema theory, any information that students have about a topic influences the quantity of information they are going to acquire by reading a passage relevant to that topic (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Knowledge about key ideas on the text influences their understanding of words and subsequently their comprehension of the given text. Students with LD lack this knowledge (background, word and schematic) and they tend to use less comprehension strategies that inhibit the successful comprehension of the text.

Students with SEN do not possess appropriate strategies for problem situations and most of the times they are at a frustration level of reading of a text, which means that they come across difficulties with pronunciation or word recognition or meaning (Gersten et al., 2001). They fail to use metacognitive strategies, such as monitoring their comprehension and evaluating whether or not it was performed successfully, and as a result, they lose motivation to continue trying. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) maintained that there is a strong relationship between motivation and reading growth, compared to low motivation and its effects. The use of reading comprehension strategies may seem daunting and demotivating as they develop a sense of failure and frustration due to repeated unsuccessful efforts which result in low self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) has defined self-efficacy as one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task. Low self-efficacy results in limited task persistence which inhibits text comprehension.

It is evident that students' reading comprehension is influenced by various internal factors that most of the time inhibits it, there are other external factors that may affect their persistence to enhance their attempts when they come across a problematic situation, during which they struggle to comprehend the meaning of a given text. Antoniou and Sideridis (2008) and Sideridis (2006) demonstrated how the classroom environment may have a positive or negative effect on the enhancement of achievements for students with LD while this environment is under the control of the teacher (Pierce, 1994). Wentzel (2002) also maintains that teachers can have a big influence on students' motivation and behaviour displayed in the classroom, as they communicate their goals and expectations to the students, create contexts conducive to the learning and adoption of these goals (Ames & Ames, 1984; Solomon, Schaps, Watson & Battistich, 1992) they provide guidance, encouragement and supports students learning. In other words, teachers model interest in subject matter and students may learn by observing their teacher's behaviour, needs and beliefs which are represented by their preferred teaching style.

1.1. Teaching styles

A classroom is a dynamic social environment that reflects interactions between students learning styles and teachers' instructional methods and approaches (Antoniou & Sideridis, 2008; Pierce, 1994), in order for effective language teaching to be achieved. Students learn in many ways, others by seeing or hearing or by memorising or visualising. On the other hand, teachers' methods also vary. Some instructors lecture, others focus on rules and examples, others demonstrate or focus on discussion (Felder & Henriques, 1995). Teaching requires skills, intelligence and diligence and the faculty struggle in order to succeed to meet the challenges in the classroom (Kardia & Wright, 2004), it does not require just telling and listening. How much a student learns is influenced both by the student's ability and preparation but also by the compatibility between his/her approach to learning and the instructor's approach to teaching (Antoniou & Sideridis, 2008). Teachers, just like students, may have natural preferences and styles that suit their personalities and experiences when teaching. These styles are associated with particular teaching roles, attitudes, behaviours and preferred methods.

Grasha (1994) characterises teaching styles as multidimensional and defines them as the teachers' personal qualities that represent a pattern of needs, beliefs and behaviours displayed in the classroom. As shown in Table 1, Grasha (1994) identifies five types of teaching styles, Bibace, Catlin, Quirk, Beattie and Slabaugh (1981) and Quirk (1994) distinguish four teaching styles, whereas Langlois et al. (2016) refer to two different types of teaching styles.

Table 1. Teaching styles and their operational definitions

Grasha (1994)	Expert	Teacher possesses the knowledge and expertise the students need
	Formal Authority	Teacher possesses status among students and focuses on clear and acceptable ways of doing things using rigid and standardised methods
	Personal Model	Teacher used the 'teaching by personal example' method and serves as a prototype of how students should think and behave
	Facilitator	Teacher emphasises teacher–student interaction and provides consult, support and encouragement
	Delegator	Teacher emphasises students autonomous work and serves as a resource person when requested
Bibace et al. (1981); Quirk (1994)	Assertive	Teacher asks questions and gives answers which relay information
	Suggestive	Teacher offers opinion and suggests alternatives based on personal experience
	Collaborative	Teacher accepts and explores learners' ideas and emphasises them by relaying his/her personal experience
	Facilitative	Teacher extends beyond teaching content, focuses on students' feelings, encourages autonomy and offers help when requested
Langlois et al. (2016)	Pedagogy	Teacher decides the content of teaching and focuses on building a foundation of knowledge. He/she serves as a Director or Expert
	Andragogy	Teacher focuses on the application of knowledge and development of competency skills. He/she serves as a resource person

As it is evident all the above distinctions of different teaching styles share common characteristics. In any case, a teaching style represents a pattern of needs, beliefs and behaviours that teachers display in the classroom and they can vary their teaching styles based on their intention, their goals and individual needs and situations. Although many teachers teach their students in the way they were taught when they were students, according to their learning style (Nicol – Senft & Seider, 2010), they can choose to adopt a teaching style that can be teacher centred (i.e., assertive teaching style) or learner-centered (i.e., facilitative teaching style) or a combination of both and create a primarily controlling or informational environment. Research has shown that when teachers' teaching style is oriented towards controlling environment, as it is evident when instructors adopt the assertive, expert, formal authority or pedagogy teaching style, the students display lower motivation and self-esteem (Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Kostener, Kauffman, 1982) as control means consistent enforcement of rules without giving the students the chance to learn through experience and to be autonomous. On the contrary, adopting an informational teaching style which supports students' autonomy, both motivation and self-esteem are increased (Deci & Ryan, 1982a, 1982b), due to the fact that students learn in a flexible, innovative and autonomous environment where feedback related to their performance is provided. Still, there are cases each style is more effective, depending on the situation. For example, there may be cases that the teacher should take control of the teaching to make sure that a solid base of knowledge is created, as shown in the research conducted by Antoniou and Sideridis (2008) where it was indicated that a structured teaching style may result in enhanced reading comprehension for students with learning disabilities. In other cases, though, the learner must be encouraged to be responsible for his/her own learning. Furthermore, studies have shown that matching teaching styles to learning styles can significantly enhance motivation and subsequently academic achievement (Antoniou & Sideridis, 2008; Claxton & Murell, 1987; Griggs & Dunn, 1984;

Smith & Renzulli, 1984). Other researches (Baker et al., 1988; Cavanagh & Coffin, 1994; Kowoser & Berman, 1996; Partridge, 1983), however, have shown that creative mismatches in teaching styles and learning styles stimulate flexibility in learning, as students need to 'stretch' their abilities in order to learn. In conclusion, it could be said that teachers should thoughtfully assess their teaching styles based on their learners' needs in order to achieve more improved and effective learning.

In the relevant literature, studies on conceptions of effective teachers and instruction methods are abundant (Sheehan & DuPrey, 1999; Weinerman, 1998). However, little attention has been directed towards specifying the nature of the relationship between teaching styles and the reading comprehension skill of students with SEN in an inclusive environment. Taking into account the effect that teaching styles have on students' academic performance, the present study tries to examine whether the FL teacher's teaching style affects the reading comprehension skill of students with and without SEN.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Teachers
Seventeen teachers, four males and thirteen females, aged 31–57 years old (M = 39.65; sd = 6.782), were voluntarily accepted to participate in the study. Their academic qualifications vary, as two of them have a C2 Certificate, nine have a Bachelor's degree and six of them have a Master's Degree. Also, three of them were working in private English institutes while the rest of them were working in public primary schools. From those working in the public sector, ten are permanent teachers while seven are substitute teachers and only two work in two schools at the same time. Their teaching experience ranges from six to thirty years (M = 13.41; sd = 7.02).

2.1.2. Students
Overall 309 students, 9–12 years old, of various suburban primary public schools around Greece participated in the present study. Fifty-five of the students that took part in the research were identified by public diagnostic centres as students with SEN. The rest of the learners' reference level range from A1 to A2 level according to Common Reference Levels of the Common European Framework for FLs (Council of Europe, 2001), many of whom had English lessons in private FL institutes in the afternoon. The schools accommodated students of middle-class socioeconomic status.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Teachers' scenario test
Initially, the teachers were given one teaching—style questionnaire, in order for their preferred teaching style to be emerged. The questionnaire included four teaching situation scenarios, each offering four different possible suggestions of how they would proceed when facing teaching and assessing situations, each of which corresponded to the four teaching styles: facilitative, assertive, suggestive and collaborative.

2.2.2. Students' reading comprehension test
Students were given a reading test, which was based on the theory of Padeliadou's and Antoniou (2008) Reading Test, to assess their reading comprehension skills. The reading comprehension test was a 250-word text followed by seven multiple-choice questions with four possible answers each (one the desired answer and three seemingly plausible responses). The text was a short story at the same level of vocabulary, grammar and syntax as the texts in the students' school books, and thus it was neither too short, in order to include all the relevant information for the pupils to be able to answer the multiple-choice questions, nor too long to make them lose interest and demotivate them

(Antoniou & Panteliadou, 2008). The seven multiple-choice questions were examining the students' ability to comprehend the information given in the text literally and inferentially, their ability to find the information that does not match with text, and their ability to find another title for the text. It also assessed the students' skills to draw conclusions based on the information given in the text. The internal consistency of the test was adequate (Cronbach's α = 0.63).

2.2.3. Procedure

Students' testing was conducted on school grounds in the students' classroom. At the beginning of the lesson the students were informed about what this test was about and in order to minimise their anxiety and maximise their effort, as they were asked to perform a test out of the ordinary, it was also stressed to them that they would not get a mark for it, as the tests were not related with the evaluation of their performance at school. For those reasons, all the tests were taken anonymously.

3. Results

Overall, the results of the four teaching scenarios have indicated a preference towards the suggestive teaching style (54.41%) in comparison to the facilitative (20.59%), collaborative (20.59%) and assertive teaching style (4.41%). Although the number and percentage of teaching style occurrences are elaborated in the research (Table 2), the main focus of this study is the overall occurrence of teaching styles in all four teaching scenarios.

Table 2. Number (*N*) and percentage of teaching style occurrences for each scenario

Scenario	Assertive	Collaborative	Facilitative	Suggestive
1	0	4 (23.53%)	6 (35.29%)	7 (41.18%)
2	0	5 (29.41%)	4 (23.53%)	8 (47.06%)
3	3 (17.65%)	0	4 (23.53%)	10 (58.82%)
4	0	5 (29.41%)	0	12 (70.59%)
Overall	3 (4.41%)	14 (20.59%)	14 (20.59%)	37 (54.41%)

Regression analysis showed that although students' reading comprehension skill is not affected by teachers' assertive (R^2 = 0.002; $p > 0.10$) and collaborative teaching style (R^2= 0.001; $p > 0.10$), facilitative and suggestive teaching style significantly influence students' performance in the reading comprehension skill. More specifically, students' scores were lower for teachers' applying the facilitative teaching style (R^2 = 0.035; $p < 0.001$) and higher for teachers' applying the suggestive teaching style (R^2 = 0.02; $p < 0.001$).

4. Discussion

The main aim of this study was to examine whether the instructors' teaching style affects the reading comprehension skill of students with SEN. After examining the factors that influence the preference of specific teaching style and the other variables that affect students' performance in reading comprehension skills, regression analysis was performed to evaluate the effect of each of the four distinctive teaching styles on students' scores. Findings showed teaching styles have a significant impact on the students' competence in comprehending written text. Moreover, although assertive and collaborative teaching styles do not affect students' scores in the reading comprehension skill, there is a significant correlation between teachers' suggestive and facilitative teaching style and scores on the students' reading comprehension test. More specifically, according to the study, the facilitative teaching style has a negative effect on students' performance while on the other hand, the effect of suggestive teaching style was a positive one.

It is undeniable that facilitative instruction engages students in problem-solving situations, encourages them to articulate and theorises what they already know in relation to the meaning of their experiences and interpretations (Preece & Griffin, 2002) and allows them to critically think and

undertake structured reflection on how the events may influence their personal circumstances as it helps them 'make sense' of experiences in relation to real-world events (Gregory, 2002). Although this instructional approach makes a contribution to the students' learning, motivation and ability to become self-directive, it also empowers them to be autonomous and responsible for their own learning. Students with SEN, on the other hand, most of the time feel insecure as they have deficits in implementing learning strategies without guidance, they fail to develop reading comprehension strategies and use of monitoring procedures (Botsas & Padeliadu, 2003; Gajria & Salvia, 1992). In such cases, facilitative teaching approaches that promote problem-solving and critical thinking can be uncomfortable for students, and maybe in contrast to students' superficial approaches to learning (Andrews, 1996).

In order to improve their reading comprehension skills, students should be taught strategies such as the search for patterns of words and identify key concepts in order to identify the main idea of the text. Antoniou and Souvignier (2007) on the basis of the data of Souvignier and Mokhelesgerami (2006) maintain that students with LD acquire reading strategies when they are categorised in a simple schema that can be easily learned and remembered. In this context, the use of suggestive teaching style involves the teacher modelling of the strategies that students are learning, giving guided practice and feedback on the issue of the strategies and promoting the independent practice to apply the strategies. The teacher defines and explains the selected strategy to students and models its usage. Students are encouraged to practice what they have learned in a guided instructional setting, by following the teacher's example. Mastropieri and Scruggs (1997) reported that students with SEN may improve their reading comprehension skills if the teacher provides them with support, modelling and guided teaching and opportunities to practice across text types. In this way they become engaged and they feel highly motivated, which considered playing a vital role in the achievement tendencies of students reading comprehension difficulties (Sideridis, Mouzaki, Simos & Protopapas, 2006).

To sum up, the use of the suggestive teaching style proved to be more effective when teaching reading comprehension strategies to students with SEN, compared to the facilitative teaching style that has a negative impact to learners with learning deficits while the assertive and collaborative teaching style does not affect students' reading comprehension performance according to the findings of this study. However, further research in a larger sample, especially conducted longitudinally, would render safer results to support the above-mentioned suggestions.

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