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Autonomous and Heteronomous Roles of the Teacher in the Development of Early Reading Literacy: Challenges and Approaches

Autonomiczna i heteronomiczna rola nauczyciela w rozwoju wczesnej umiejętności czytania: wyzwania i podejścia

ABSTRACT

Early reading literacy constitutes a fundamental component of children's educational development, encompassing not only the acquisition of decoding skills but also the development of metacognitive awareness and self-regulated learning. The aim of this theoretical article is to examine the role of the teacher in early reading literacy through the lens of two pedagogical orientations: autonomous and heteronomous teaching approaches. Drawing on a narrative review of recent international literature (2020–2025), the paper primarily engages with research on metacognition in reading comprehension and self-regulated learning in early primary education. Whole-class reading models and STEAM-integrated learning environments are addressed as complementary contextual frameworks that illustrate broader instructional trends rather than as central objects of analysis.

The analysis highlights the strengths and limitations of both pedagogical orientations. Autonomous approaches are shown to support learner agency, reflective engagement with texts and the development of self-regulated reading behaviours, while heteronomous approaches provide essential structure/ scaffolding for the acquisition of foundational reading skills. The article argues that effective early literacy instruction requires a balanced and context-sensitive integration of both approaches, adapted to pupils' developmental readiness

and classroom conditions. The concluding section outlines implications for classroom practice, emphasising the importance of explicit scaffolding, dialogic reading and the gradual release of responsibility in supporting pupils' transition toward independent and reflective reading.

SŁOWA KLUCZE   ABSTRAKT

wczesna umiejętność czytania, nauczanie autonomiczne, nauczanie heteronomiczne, metapoznanie, podejście *whole-class reading*, samoregulacja uczenia się, STEAM

Wczesna umiejętność czytania stanowi fundamentalny element rozwoju edukacyjnego dzieci, obejmujący nie tylko nabywanie umiejętności dekodowania, ale także rozwój świadomości metapoznawczej i samoregulacji uczenia się. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie roli nauczyciela w rozwoju wczesnej umiejętności czytania z perspektywy dwóch orientacji pedagogicznych: autonomicznego i heteronomicznego podejścia do nauczania. Opierając się na przeglądzie narracyjnym najnowszej literatury międzynarodowej (2020–2025), artykuł koncentruje się przede wszystkim na badaniach nad metapoznaniem w rozumieniu czytanego tekstu i samoregulacji uczenia się we wczesnej edukacji podstawowej. Modele czytania dla całej klasy i zintegrowane środowiska edukacyjne STEAM są traktowane jako uzupełniające się ramy kontekstowe, ilustrujące szersze trendy dydaktyczne, a nie jako główny przedmiot analizy.

Analiza uwypukla mocne i słabe strony obu orientacji pedagogicznych. Wykazano, że podejścia autonomiczne wspierają sprawczość uczącego się, refleksyjne zaangażowanie w tekst oraz rozwój samoregulacji zachowań czytelniczych, podczas gdy podejścia heteronomiczne zapewniają niezbędną strukturę/rusztowanie do nabywania podstawowych umiejętności czytania. Artykuł dowodzi, że efektywna wczesna edukacja w zakresie umiejętności czytania i pisania wymaga zrównoważonej i uwzględniającej kontekst integracji obu podejść, dostosowanej do gotowości rozwojowej uczniów i warunków panujących w klasie. W części końcowej przedstawiono implikacje dla praktyki szkolnej, podkreślając znaczenie wyraźnego wsparcia, czytania dialogicznego i stopniowego uwalniania się od odpowiedzialności we wspieraniu uczniów w przejściu do samodzielnego i refleksyjnego czytania.

Introduction

Early reading literacy is widely recognised as a key component of children's educational trajectories, influencing not only their ability to decode written text but also their capacity to interpret, evaluate and apply information in meaningful contexts. In contemporary classrooms, reading is not merely a technical skill; it is a cognitive and

metacognitive process that shapes pupils' academic achievement across school subjects and their development as independent learners (Quigley, 2020).

The teacher plays a central role in shaping pupils' early reading development. Research consistently shows that the ways in which reading is modelled, scaffolded and practised in early education significantly influence children's long-term engagement with literacy and their comprehension outcomes (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Duke & Pearson, 2002). In addition to technical decoding skills, effective reading instruction must therefore support the development of metacognitive awareness, enabling pupils to reflect on their reading processes, monitor understanding and regulate strategies when meaning breaks down.

Within this instructional context, two pedagogical orientations are frequently discussed in the literature: approaches emphasising learner autonomy and approaches based on structured teacher guidance. Instruction that promotes autonomy encourages pupils to actively construct meaning, engage in dialogue about texts and participate in collaborative interpretation, which has been shown to support deeper comprehension and the development of self-regulated reading behaviours (Alexander, 2020; Quigley, 2020). In contrast, structured and teacher-directed approaches provide explicit guidance, clear sequencing and systematic practice, which are particularly important in the early stages of literacy acquisition when pupils are consolidating phonological awareness and decoding skills (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

This article examines how these two pedagogical orientations contribute to the development of early reading literacy by situating them within contemporary international research on metacognition, dialogic reading and cross-curricular literacy practices. Rather than positioning reading as an isolated skill, this perspective conceptualises literacy as a tool for meaning-making and learning across educational contexts (Gee, 2015). Such a framework enables comparison between Czech educational practice and broader international trends in early literacy instruction.

The aim is not to present one model as superior, but to demonstrate how a balanced, responsive approach can more effectively support diverse learners. The final section offers recommendations for practice and outlines the article's contribution to current literacy education discourse.

This article adopts a theoretical qualitative approach in the form of a narrative literature review. The analysis draws on selected international peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025, focusing on early reading literacy, metacognition, self-regulated learning and instructional approaches relevant to early primary education. The selection of sources was guided by their conceptual relevance, empirical grounding and applicability to classroom practice rather than by exhaustive systematic criteria.

Theoretical Foundations of Reading Literacy

Early reading literacy is widely conceptualised as a multidimensional process that extends beyond basic decoding to include comprehension, interpretation and the regulation of understanding during reading. Research in literacy and educational psychology indicates that early encounters with texts play a formative role in shaping children's later academic trajectories, influencing not only reading proficiency but also their ability to use written information as a resource for learning across curricular areas (Snow et al., 1998; Duke & Pearson, 2002). These early literacy experiences therefore contribute to the development of reflective and strategic readers who are able to engage with texts in flexible and purposeful ways.

During this transition, children begin linking decoding with text comprehension. This stage is considered critical, as it marks the move from "learning to read" toward "reading to learn," where reading becomes a tool for thinking, problem-solving and knowledge construction (Quigley, 2020).

The teacher's role is therefore multifaceted. Research in literacy education indicates that teachers exert a strong influence on pupils' reading development through the instructional choices they make and the forms of support they provide during reading activities. Studies have shown that explicit modelling of reading processes, combined with guided practice and feedback, contributes to pupils' engagement, reading self-efficacy and the gradual development of strategic reading behaviours (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Rosenshine, 2012). Beyond the teaching of decoding and fluency, effective instruction creates opportunities for pupils to make their thinking visible by explaining how they understand texts and how they address comprehension difficulties. Structured classroom talk and shared reading activities have been identified as important contexts in which such reflective and strategic engagement with texts can be fostered (Alexander, 2020).

Furthermore, reading literacy develops within social and cultural contexts. Children learn to read as participants in classroom communities where expectations, relationships and shared practices shape how texts are understood and interpreted (Vygotsky, 1978; Gee, 2015). Whole-class reading approaches where all pupils engage with a common text while discussing interpretations collectively have been shown to improve comprehension, promote vocabulary growth and strengthen learners' sense of agency as readers (Quigley, 2020). Such approaches encourage meaning-making as a collaborative and reflective activity rather than a solitary decoding task.

At the same time, research indicates that systematic and structured instruction remains essential, particularly in the early stages when children are establishing phonological and orthographic foundations. Effective reading instruction therefore requires a balance between guidance and independence, structure and autonomy. This aligns

with the distinction between heteronomous and autonomous teaching approaches discussed in this article. The heteronomous approach supports consistency and basic skill development, while the autonomous approach fosters interpretive flexibility and self-regulation.

In sum, early reading literacy development is shaped by the dynamic interplay between technical skill acquisition, metacognitive regulation, and socially mediated meaning-making. Teachers must navigate these dimensions thoughtfully, adapting their instructional approaches to suit pupils' developmental needs and classroom contexts.

The Autonomous Teacher in the Context of Reading Literacy

The autonomous teacher adopts a flexible approach that allows students to take responsibility for their own learning, which is crucial for their future success. This teaching model not only strengthens technical reading skills but also fosters children's ability to think critically and analyze texts.

One of the key aspects of autonomous learning is the emphasis on active student engagement. As Jarkovská (2013) points out, the interaction between the student and the text is essential for developing interpretation and evaluation skills. Methods such as **reading with reflection** enable students to share their opinions and feelings, enriching their experience and supporting collaborative learning. This discussion not only deepens text comprehension but also teaches children to express themselves and argue their points, which are essential skills for their personal and professional lives.

Another significant feature of the autonomous approach is **personalized learning**. Teachers who tailor their methods to students' individual needs create an environment where each student can develop at their own pace. Sirovátka (2012) emphasizes that such an approach considers varying levels of comprehension and children's interests, leading to greater motivation and engagement. In the context of diverse student populations, this approach is not only desirable but also necessary for effective education.

Autonomous teachers also focus on developing **critical thinking** and the ability of children to reflect on their experiences with texts. As Kropáčová (2019) states, creating an environment for independent reading supports not only reading literacy but also children's overall cognitive and emotional development. Children learn not only to read words but also to understand context and apply their knowledge in real-life situations.

Overall, the autonomous teacher plays a key role in education by promoting independence and active student engagement. Their approach to teaching reading literacy

is comprehensive, encompassing both technical skills and the development of critical thinking and reflective abilities. This educational model has the potential to prepare children for a successful life in a modern world where the ability to analyze and interpret information is increasingly important.

Thus, the autonomous teacher does not focus solely on the technical aspects of reading but also on the development of critical thinking and students' ability to reflect on their experiences with texts. They create an environment where students are encouraged to become independent readers, capable of applying their skills to diverse texts and real-world problems (Kropáčová, 2019). This approach not only supports reading literacy but also contributes to broader cognitive and emotional development.

Metacognition and Self-Regulated Learning in Early Reading Literacy

Contemporary research in reading and educational psychology conceptualises reading comprehension as an active and self-regulated process rather than a purely technical or linguistic skill. During reading, effective readers continuously reflect on their understanding, make strategic decisions and respond flexibly when comprehension difficulties arise (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). These regulatory processes enable readers to adapt their reading behaviour to the demands of different texts and reading purposes.

Within this perspective, metacognition in reading is commonly described as a cyclical process involving anticipatory planning, ongoing monitoring of meaning and post-reading evaluation of understanding. Such processes support the coordination of decoding, comprehension and strategy use, particularly as texts increase in complexity (Flavell, 1979; Duke & Pearson, 2002). Metacognitive engagement therefore represents a central mechanism through which readers gain control over their comprehension and develop flexible, strategic reading behaviour. These processes enable learners to take an active role in meaning-making rather than relying exclusively on external guidance from the teacher.

Research indicates that children who are given opportunities to engage in shared reflection, such as discussing how they approached a text or why a certain sentence was difficult, demonstrate **greater long-term gains in comprehension** and are more likely to transfer reading strategies to other subjects (Quigley, 2020). These practices are especially effective when embedded in **whole-class reading dialogues**, where pupils collaboratively negotiate interpretation and co-construct meaning. Whole-class reading discussions should be used to build shared interpretive practices and

vocabulary, as suggested by dialogic models of reading that conceptualise comprehension as a socially mediated process (Quigley, 2020).

However, the development of metacognitive awareness must be balanced with **structured instruction**, particularly in the early phases of reading acquisition. Pupils require stable decoding routines before they can successfully regulate comprehension. Thus, self-regulated learning does not replace direct instruction but **builds upon it**, gradually shifting responsibility from teacher to pupil.

In this sense, metacognition and self-regulation form a conceptual bridge between the **heteronomous** and **autonomous** teaching orientations discussed in this article. Structured guidance (heteronomy) provides the foundation for early literacy, while opportunities for reflective engagement (autonomy) support higher-order comprehension and independent reading behaviour. A balanced approach that strategically integrates these two dimensions is therefore essential for fostering effective and sustainable reading literacy development.

The Heteronomous Teacher and Their Influence on Reading Literacy

The heteronomous teaching approach is characterised by a structured and teacher-directed organisation of the learning process. In this model, the teacher provides explicit guidance, sets clear expectations and determines the sequence of instructional steps. This approach aims to ensure consistency, mastery of foundational reading skills and efficiency in classroom management, particularly in the early phases of literacy acquisition (Novák, 2017; Závodná, 2020).

In the context of early reading literacy, the heteronomous teacher plays a key role in organising and directing the learning process. This instructional orientation is characterised by a high degree of teacher control over content, pacing and instructional strategies, which allows for systematic and coherent development of foundational reading skills. Research in early literacy consistently emphasises that explicit, teacher-led instruction in phonological awareness, letter–sound correspondence and decoding strategies is particularly effective in the initial stages of reading acquisition, when pupils have not yet developed automatic word recognition (Ehri, 2005; Snow et al., 1998).

A central feature of the heteronomous teacher's influence lies in modelling and guided practice. The teacher demonstrates correct reading behaviours, verbalises strategies and provides structured opportunities for pupils to practise newly introduced skills under close supervision. This approach reduces cognitive overload and uncertainty, especially for beginning readers who rely on clear instructional signals and predictable routines. Such explicit modelling and step-by-step guidance support

accuracy and fluency, which are essential prerequisites for later reading comprehension (Rosenshine, 2012).

The heteronomous teacher also plays an important role in maintaining instructional coherence and classroom stability. By setting clear expectations and controlling the progression of learning tasks, the teacher ensures that all pupils engage with the same instructional focus and receive comparable learning opportunities. This is particularly relevant in classrooms where pupils share similar developmental levels or where curricular demands require structured sequencing of literacy instruction. Research suggests that well-organised teacher-directed instruction can contribute to more equitable learning outcomes by minimising gaps in early skill acquisition (Snow et al., 1998).

Although the heteronomous approach is often associated with reduced learner autonomy, its instructional purpose is developmental rather than restrictive. Through repeated exposure to structured guidance, pupils gradually internalise reading strategies and routines that later support independent reading. Studies on instructional scaffolding indicate that self-regulated learning emerges through carefully designed phases of teacher support, in which responsibility is gradually transferred from teacher to pupil (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Duke & Pearson, 2002). In this sense, the heteronomous teacher establishes the conditions under which autonomy can later develop.

Overall, the heteronomous teacher exerts a strong influence on early reading literacy by providing explicit instruction, modelling effective reading strategies and ensuring instructional consistency. While this approach may not prioritise independent meaning-making in its initial phases, it plays a crucial role in building the technical and strategic foundations upon which more autonomous and reflective reading practices can be constructed.

However, the heteronomous approach has limitations when applied rigidly. Excessive control can reduce pupils' opportunities to make meaning independently, weaken their motivation and restrict the development of interpretive or critical reading skills (Quigley, 2020). Therefore, heteronomous teaching is most effective when viewed as a **developmental stage** rather than a dominant long-term instructional philosophy.

In sum, the heteronomous teacher provides the **necessary foundation** for early literacy development by ensuring structured skill acquisition, modelling reading strategies and maintaining focus and clarity in the reading process. When combined thoughtfully with opportunities for reflective and independent engagement with texts, this approach contributes to a balanced model of reading literacy instruction.

Characteristics of the Heteronomous Approach

Heteronomous teaching is characterized by structure and clearly defined goals. According to Novák (2017), the heteronomous teacher provides students with precise steps and strategies for correctly reading, understanding, and analyzing texts. This approach often involves standardized methods designed to ensure uniform learning outcomes across all students. For example, reading literacy instruction may include exercises focused on word decoding or practicing text comprehension through repetitive tasks.

The advantage of this approach lies in its efficiency – by maintaining clear structure and consistent rules, students can quickly acquire fundamental reading skills. This is particularly beneficial for students who require a strong framework for learning.

Advantages of the Heteronomous Approach

The heteronomous approach provides a clear structure and is highly effective in classrooms where students share similar skill levels and knowledge. Ensuring uniform learning outcomes can be advantageous when teaching fundamental reading skills, as it helps all students achieve a minimum level of literacy (Kropáčová, 2019).

Another benefit is its role in maintaining discipline and order. The teacher retains control over the learning process, which supports effective classroom management. This approach proves particularly useful in larger classrooms or when instruction must follow a structured timeline.

Disadvantages of the Heteronomous Approach

Despite these benefits, the heteronomous approach presents several limitations. One key drawback is the lack of individual adaptation. In classrooms with students of varying skill levels, a uniform approach may prove ineffective. As Závodná (2020) notes, this approach does not adequately address individual student needs, potentially resulting in demotivation or frustration among some learners.

Additionally, it offers limited student engagement. Heteronomous teaching primarily involves passive learning, where students receive knowledge without opportunities for independent inquiry. This lack of autonomy may negatively impact students' motivation and hinder their ability to develop critical thinking skills (Švec, 2015).

Comparison of Autonomous and Heteronomous Approaches

A comparison of these two approaches highlights their fundamental differences in pedagogical strategy. The autonomous teacher encourages active student participation, independence, and decision-making in the learning process. In contrast, the heteronomous teacher focuses on teacher-led instruction, structured lesson plans, and defined learning steps (Novák, 2017). Each approach brings its own advantages and disadvantages, depending on the educational context and students' individual needs.

The autonomous approach fosters deep text comprehension and higher student motivation, often leading to long-term engagement with reading. Meanwhile, the heteronomous approach remains effective for teaching fundamental reading skills, particularly for students who benefit from structured instruction (Sirovátka, 2012). No single approach is universally superior. An optimal combination of both methods can enhance reading literacy development in diverse student groups.

Integration of Autonomous and Heteronomous Approaches in Practice

Although these approaches are distinct, their combination can be highly effective in classroom practice. Teachers should strive to create a balanced learning environment that utilizes each approach based on students' needs.

Autonomous learning should be emphasized once students develop basic reading skills, allowing them to explore texts more independently. Heteronomous instruction, however, should remain a key component of early education to ensure systematic reading skill development and structured learning (Kropáčová, 2019).

Teachers are encouraged to apply flexible teaching strategies that can be adapted to suit diverse classroom environments. This is particularly important in heterogeneous classrooms, where students possess different reading skill levels. Beyond cognitive aspects, emotional and motivational factors must also be considered, as they significantly influence students' long-term engagement with reading (Závodná, 2020).

A combined approach provides a wider range of teaching strategies, allowing teachers to tailor instruction to students' needs. By balancing the development of technical reading skills with higher-order thinking, teachers can effectively support both reading competence and student independence (Sirovátka, 2012).

In the early stages of literacy, pupils benefit from highly guided and explicit instruction, particularly in relation to phonics, decoding and fluency. These foundational skills form the basis upon which deeper comprehension can occur. The heteronomous

approach provides clarity and stability during this phase, ensuring that core reading strategies are internalised and automatised (Závodná, 2020). However, once pupils demonstrate sufficient decoding fluency, the learning environment can gradually shift toward greater autonomy, allowing them to apply strategies independently, interpret texts critically and reflect on meaning.

Teachers initially model and guide reading processes, then provide shared practice opportunities, and finally support pupils in applying strategies independently. Such progression encourages children to own their reading, strengthening motivation, confidence and engagement.

Whole-class reading approaches offer a practical framework for integrating both orientations. Shared reading discussions allow the teacher to structure the reading process (heteronomy) while inviting pupils to share interpretations, pose questions and consider alternative viewpoints (autonomy). This not only develops comprehension but also fosters collaborative reasoning and metacognitive awareness (Quigley, 2020).

From a cross-disciplinary perspective, STEAM-oriented instruction offers opportunities to position literacy as an integrative component of learning rather than as a standalone curricular domain. Studies on STREAM education indicate that reading and writing tasks embedded in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics projects support pupils' ability to work with specialised texts, visual representations and multimodal sources of information typical of these fields (Sun & Zhong, 2024). Through such experiences, pupils develop not only subject-specific understanding but also flexible reading strategies that can be adapted across different learning contexts and disciplinary discourses.

Overall, the integration of autonomous and heteronomous approaches acknowledges that effective reading instruction is dynamic rather than ideological. A flexible teacher adapts the level of guidance to the learner's readiness, gradually supporting their transition from dependent novice to independent reader.

Practical Recommendations for Teachers

Effective reading instruction involves several key teaching strategies. Direct explanation allows teachers to explicitly explain reading strategies and demonstrate their application, enhancing students' understanding of the reading process (Zormanová. 2018). Repetitive reading practice through regular exercises improves both fluency and comprehension (Zormanová, 2018). Formative assessment, by providing continuous feedback, supports students' motivation and literacy development (Farkašová, 2020). Blending autonomous and heteronomous learning through the combination

of self-assessment and teacher-led evaluation encourages a balanced approach to literacy education.

Reading instruction should also be adapted to different developmental stages. In early childhood, the focus should be on letter recognition and phonemic awareness. In later stages, instruction should aim to develop critical thinking, text analysis, and interpretation skills.

This article has examined the autonomous and heteronomous roles of the teacher in the development of early reading literacy, demonstrating that these approaches are most effective when understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The heteronomous approach provides the structured, explicit instruction necessary for pupils to acquire foundational decoding and fluency skills. The autonomous approach, in turn, fosters interpretive flexibility, metacognitive awareness and self-regulated reading behaviour. When carefully balanced, these approaches enable pupils to transition from dependent novice readers to independent, reflective and motivated readers.

By situating these teaching orientations within contemporary international research – including studies on metacognition in reading comprehension, whole-class dialogic reading and STEAM-integrated literacy learning – the article has shown that the development of early reading literacy is a multidimensional process. Reading develops not only through cognitive skill acquisition but also through collaborative meaning-making, social interaction and reflective engagement with texts. The balanced integration of both teaching orientations therefore supports sustainable literacy development aligned with pupils' cognitive, emotional and social needs.

Implications for Practice

- **Structured decoding instruction should precede autonomous reading tasks.** Pupils need a secure foundation before they are asked to apply strategies independently.
- **Teachers should model metacognitive strategies explicitly** (e.g., think-alouds, comprehension self-monitoring prompts).
- **Whole-class reading discussions** should be used to build shared interpretive practices and vocabulary while promoting student voice.
- **Gradual release of responsibility** (model → guided → shared → independent) should be the organising principle of early literacy instruction.
- **Reading and writing tasks should be embedded in authentic inquiry contexts** (e.g., STEAM projects) to enhance motivation and transfer of strategies across subjects.

Scientific Contribution

This article contributes to the field in three key ways:

1. **Theoretical**
   It reframes the autonomous–heteronomous distinction not as a dichotomy but as a **developmental continuum**, aligning literacy development with metacognition and self-regulated learning research.
2. **Methodological**
   It integrates **recent international literature (2020–2025)** into a framework applicable to Central European early primary education, addressing the gap identified by reviewers.
3. **Practical**
   It provides a **scalable instructional model** (structured guidance → shared reasoning → independent interpretation) that teachers can apply in real classroom settings.

Conclusion

This paper examined the autonomous and heteronomous approaches in early reading literacy instruction, focusing on their influence on student motivation and comprehension. Key findings include the importance of integrating both approaches for optimal reading development, the value of formative assessment in promoting student engagement and progress, and the necessity of differentiated instruction to ensure effective literacy support for all learners.

Future Research and Practical Implications

Further longitudinal studies are necessary to assess the long-term impact of blended teaching approaches on reading literacy. Exploring the role of digital technologies in supporting both autonomous and heteronomous learning may further enhance reading instruction.

A final thought: a flexible teaching approach that incorporates elements of both autonomous and heteronomous instruction can significantly enhance literacy education and foster lifelong learning among students.

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