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# Does learning to read affect naming skills? Insights from ERPs during letter and picture naming tasks.

Marjolaine Cohen, Gwendoline Mahé, Pascal Zesiger, Marina Laganaro

## Abstract

Numerous studies report that poor readers display low performance in naming tasks. However, very few studies have investigated the development of naming skills along with the development of reading fluency and its variability in typically developing children. In this study, we used electro-encephalographic (EEG) recordings acquired during letter and picture naming tasks to investigate how naming skills develop and, possibly, interact with age and reading level variations. Ninety-three children aged 7–12 years named letters and pictures under an EEG recording, and their reading performance was assessed. ERP results on amplitudes show that age and reading level have similar effects on the entire letter naming time-course. By contrast, age and reading level have different effects on the picture naming time-course, with a specific effect of reading level on the N1 time-interval, associated with visuo-conceptual processing and an effect of both age and reading on later time-windows. On the microstate analysis, age remains the only predictor of the variance in global electric field at scalp for both letter and picture naming indicating that reading skill is not related to a modulation of the mental processes underlying naming.

Keywords: naming – reading acquisition – ERP – children

## Highlights:

- The entire time course of letter naming is modulated by both age and reading level
- N200 in Picture naming is specifically related to reading level

1 1. Introduction

2       Fluent reading, described as effortless recognition of words and immediate  
3 comprehension, is important for both academic and professional achievement. Even if a great  
4 amount of time and educational resources are dedicated to teaching children to read from Grade  
5 1, reading level varies from one child to another. In addition to dyslexic children, who  
6 experience severe and persistent difficulties in learning to read and in reaching fluent reading,  
7 poor, average, and good readers exist throughout the learning process. Previous studies  
8 investigating the predictors and precursors of reading repeatedly revealed that naming and  
9 reading are closely related (Araújo et al., 2015; Kirby et al., 2010). On the one hand, previous  
10 behavioral research with typically developing children suggested that naming letters is a  
11 stronger predictor of concurrent and later reading skills than naming pictures (for a review, see  
12 Araújo et al., 2015). On the other hand, research with dyslexic participants, as well as research  
13 on the development of reading networks in the brain, suggested that naming pictures is  
14 specifically related to reading (Nation et al., 2005). In this study, we aim to understand how the  
15 naming of letters and pictures interacts with both age and reading level, taking advantage of the  
16 insights revealed by event-related potentials (ERPs) recorded during naming tasks.

17

18 1.1. How naming is related to age and reading

19       Letter knowledge and rapid naming of letters are among the best predictors of reading  
20 efficiency. However, whereas letter knowledge seems to predict reading in early stages (Hogan  
21 et al., 2005), letter naming remains a powerful predictor throughout development (Araújo et al.,  
22 2015; Kirby et al., 2010; Wakamiya et al., 2011). Dyslexic children are slower at rapid letter  
23 naming than their age controls (Denckla & Rudel, 1976) and their reading-level controls  
24 (Araújo et al., 2011; Snyder & Downey, 1995). However, as the rapid naming task involves a  
25 large array of processing stages, from visual exploration to phonological encoding and

1 articulation, it remains unclear which process(es) is/are responsible for slowness in letter  
2 naming. To our knowledge, there is no published study investigating discrete letter naming (i.e.,  
3 items presented one after another on a computer screen) with dyslexic or typically developed  
4 children.

5         Reading ability also correlates with picture naming (Katz, 1986). Dyslexic children  
6 perform similarly to reading age controls (on average, two years younger) in picture naming  
7 tasks (Nation et al., 2001; Snowling et al., 1988; Swan & Goswami, 1997), suggesting that  
8 performance in picture naming tasks is more related to reading efficiency than to age. Following  
9 these lines, pre-school children at risk of developing dyslexia show naming weaknesses  
10 (Scarborough, 1990), as do adults with a history of reading difficulty (Dietrich & Brady, 2001).  
11 Interestingly, low performance in naming is not specific to dyslexic individuals; it was found  
12 in both poor readers (Swan & Goswami, 1997) and poor comprehenders (Nation et al., 2001).  
13 However, it should be noted that the poor readers in Swan and Goswami's (1997) study had  
14 significantly lower IQ scores than participants in both the dyslexic and control groups.  
15 Taken together, these results suggest that the naming difficulties observed among poor readers  
16 and poor comprehenders might be a consequence of semantic weakness, whereas the naming  
17 deficit observed among dyslexic children might be a consequence of phonological weaknesses.  
18 At the behavioral level, the naming deficit seems to be fairly independent of the participants'  
19 age but related to semantic and phonologic weaknesses. The relationship between naming and  
20 reading appears to be reciprocal. On the one hand, a naming deficit can be found in at risk  
21 children before reading instruction suggesting that naming influences reading. On the other  
22 hand, improvement in reading skills often leads to improvements in naming skills, suggesting  
23 that progress in reading fluency may impact on naming performance. Indeed, longitudinal  
24 studies reported better rapid naming skills as children age and become better readers (Clayton  
25 et al., 2020; Furnes & Samuelsson, 2011; Wolf, Bally, & Morris, 1986). To date, very few

1 studies have investigated naming skills in typically developing children, and none have reported  
2 how naming skills develop throughout reading instruction. The present study aims at filling this  
3 gap in the literature by investigating how learning to read affects naming skills in children aged  
4 7-12 years.

## 6 1.2. Specific links between picture and word processing

7 A large part of the visual word recognition literature conducted at the brain level has  
8 investigated the development of the visual word form area (VWFA; Cohen & Dehaene, 2004;  
9 Dehaene & Cohen, 2011; Dehaene-Lambertz et al., 2018; McClandiss et al., 2003). The results  
10 suggest that the VWFA recruits neurons that were previously dedicated to object recognition  
11 (Dehaene-Lambertz et al., 2018; McClandiss et al., 2003), and even after learning to read, the  
12 VWFA continues to be activated in various tasks requiring links between visual input and  
13 phonological retrieval (Dehaene-Lambertz et al., 2018; Vogel et al., 2012, 2014). This suggests  
14 that object and word recognition not only share common processing stages but also share a  
15 common neural basis. Thus, it appears logical that an object naming deficit may be related to  
16 poor reading skills. It has been shown that the development of sensitivity to print is not related  
17 to age, but to reading instruction, as the VWFA is not activated when illiterate adults are  
18 confronted with print (Dehaene et al., 2015). This suggests that the links between object naming  
19 and reading efficiency might develop with reading instruction, and stronger links may appear  
20 as reading efficiency develops.

21 According to the VWFA literature, a naming deficit is present before reading instruction  
22 and constitutes a core deficit for poor and dyslexic readers. This result aligns with studies  
23 reporting naming deficits in kindergarteners at risk for dyslexia (Scarborough, 1990), and  
24 studies reporting a naming deficit in adults with compensated reading difficulties (Dietrich &  
25 Brady, 2001; McCrory et al., 2005).

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1.3. Insights from EEG studies

There is limited available literature on children’s letter naming with electro-encephalographic (EEG) recordings, and we are not aware of previous studies that recorded ERPs during a letter naming task performed by a reading-disabled sample. Results of one previous study on typically developing participants from 7 to 10 suggest that ERPs recorded during letter naming were unaffected by reading level variations but were affected by age (Cohen et al., 2018).

Relative to letter naming, there is a larger EEG literature focusing on picture naming, although studies with children performing overt naming tasks are limited. Two studies investigated picture naming in typically developing children using ERPs (Gómez-Velásquez et al., 2013; Greenham & Stelmack, 2001), and two others focused on dyslexic children (Greenham et al., 2003; Trauzettel-Klosinski et al., 2006).

Gómez-Velásquez et al. (2013) sorted their sample of typically developing children into two groups—slow and fast namers—according to the speed at which they named pictures during a standard behavioral rapid naming task. The task performed during ERP recording was not a standard naming task; children had to decide whether or not a picture and a word (which was presented on screen after the picture) matched. The authors reported that slow namers showed larger amplitudes in both congruent and incongruent conditions compared to fast namers. However, it should be stressed that the ERP analyses were related to the processing of the word presented after the picture rather than on the processing of the picture, and the authors concluded that the slow namers’ speed indicates difficulty in building adequate associations between visual and phonological representations of words. The hypothesis that slow and fast namers, or poor and good readers, have differing abilities to process pictures remains to be tested.

1           Greenham and Stelmack (2001) recorded ERPs during standard picture naming, word  
2 reading, and superimposed picture–word tasks performed by nine children aged 9–13 years.  
3 They reported significant differences between ERPs recorded when naming pictures or reading  
4 words, with the picture naming task eliciting larger amplitudes than the word reading task. This  
5 difference has been interpreted as the difference between words and pictures in terms of the  
6 automaticity of lexical access or effortful access to conceptual representations.

7           Greenham et al. (2003) and Trauzettel-Klosinski et al. (2006) investigated the effects of  
8 reading level on impaired participants’ performance in a standard picture naming task. Both  
9 studies reported increased error rates and longer reaction times in dyslexic participants  
10 compared to typically developed participants. Surprisingly, no electrophysiological correlates  
11 of these differences were observed in the picture naming task. The ERP waves for words  
12 exhibited reduced N450 amplitudes in dyslexics compared to controls for reading or  
13 superimposed picture–word tasks. The authors of both studies suggested that the “visual”  
14 pathway is somehow preserved in dyslexic participants, at least in the early stages of picture  
15 processing. In addition, Greenham et al. (2003) hypothesized that electrophysiological  
16 differences between dyslexic and typically developed participants may be observed in ERP time  
17 windows beyond the 500 ms window analyzed in their study, possibly closer to articulation,  
18 and may be associated with phonological processes. This aligns with the behavioral studies  
19 summarized above suggesting that the picture naming deficit observed in individuals with  
20 dyslexia is mainly attributed to a phonological weakness (for a review, see Nation, 2005).

21           A study using positron emission tomography (PET) during picture naming and word  
22 reading in dyslexic adults revealed an interesting pattern: dyslexic adults showed reduced  
23 activation in the left occipitotemporal area during both picture naming and word reading tasks,  
24 even if the behavioral performance during the tasks was comparable across the dyslexic and  
25 control groups (McCrary et al., 2005). Thus, abnormal activation in this region might not be

1 specific to orthographic decoding, but may reflect a more general impairment in the ability to  
2 integrate visual and phonological information. The fact that a significant difference in the  
3 processing of pictures and words remains in dyslexic adults suggests that this general  
4 impairment in the ability to integrate phonological and visual input is a core weakness in  
5 disabled readers.

6 Taken together, the results of brain imaging studies with reading-disabled participants suggest  
7 that a picture naming deficit is present in these participants, but so far, the specific underlying  
8 processes in which it appears remains unclear. Some results implicate lexico-semantic  
9 processes in the naming deficit, whereas some others implicate phonological processes.

10         Regarding the effect of age on the electrophysiological correlates of picture naming, a  
11 longitudinal study conducted by Ojima et al. (2011), which used the picture–word interference  
12 task, found similar ERP components in 7- and 9-year-old children and in adults, but with shifts  
13 in latencies. The authors concluded that the differences in reaction times observed between  
14 children and adults rely on acceleration of the processes underlying the task. However, different  
15 results have been reported by Laganaro et al. (2015) with an overt picture naming task in  
16 typically developing 7–8-year-olds, 10–12-year-olds, and adults. The results showed that the  
17 acceleration observed in word production from childhood to adulthood seems to rely on changes  
18 in the global topographies in the P1-N1 time-window, associated with visual and conceptual  
19 processes. Beyond the P1-N1 complex, the same sequence of global topographic patterns was  
20 found in children and adults, although older children and adults showed components earlier  
21 than younger children did. Similarly, Cohen et al. (2018) found that the P2 component appears  
22 around 320 ms for older children and around 400 ms for younger children, suggesting that  
23 lexico-semantic processing is specifically shortened with development. Taken together, the  
24 results regarding the effect of age suggest an acceleration of specific visuo-conceptual and  
25 lexical-semantic processing stages.



1 Cohen et al. (2018) compared the effects of age and reading level on ERPs recorded  
2 during letter and picture naming tasks. Interestingly, amplitudes in the time interval  
3 corresponding to the N1 component during picture naming were specifically linked with  
4 reading level variations, whereas age variations predicted amplitudes in a time interval  
5 corresponding to the P2 component. This pattern indicates independent effects of age and  
6 reading level during picture naming. Even though lexical processing seems to be associated  
7 with age and reading level variations, lexical concept retrieval (N1) was specifically related to  
8 reading level, whereas lexico-semantic retrieval (P2) was specifically related to age. It is  
9 important to note that Cohen et al. (2018) only reported their analysis of amplitudes, without  
10 identifying the topographies underlying these processing stages. It is therefore unclear if a  
11 difference in amplitudes during letter and picture naming is related to a difference in  
12 topography. If this was the case, it would suggest that children varying in age and/or reading  
13 level might be involved in different cognitive processes during certain time intervals.

14 Based on the above results, lexico-semantic and phonological processes seem to  
15 underlie the effects of both age and reading level on ERPs recorded during a picture naming  
16 task. Nevertheless, the effects of reading level on ERPs recorded during picture naming have  
17 only been investigated by comparing dyslexic and control groups. Typically developing  
18 children do not show a naming deficit, but their naming skills could evolve throughout reading  
19 acquisition, and specific processing stages may be modulated by reading fluency development.  
20 This must be addressed by future research.

21

22

#### 23 1.4. Present study

24 Building on the studies presented above and the literature concerning the development  
25 of the VWFA, the present study aims to understand how naming skills develop along with

1 reading acquisition based on ERP recordings acquired during picture and letter naming tasks  
2 performed by a large sample of typically developing children aged 7–12 years.

3         Based on the literature on the VWFA and on the results from behavioral and  
4 electrophysiological studies it seems that reading skills and age may be related to different  
5 processes underlying picture naming. In particular we expect the N1 component, which  
6 corresponds to visuo-conceptual processing in picture naming, to be sensitive to reading level  
7 and the P2 component, which corresponds to lexico-semantic processing, to be sensitive to age  
8 variations. By contrast, in letter naming, which is one of the best predictors of subsequent  
9 reading skills, all underlying processes (the entire time course of letter naming ERPs) should  
10 be modulated by reading level and age.

11

## 12 2. Method

### 13 2.1 Participants

14         Ninety-three children aged 7–12 years (mean = 9.5 years; min = 7.0; max = 12.10; 43  
15 boys) participated in the study. Children attended grades 2–6. The data for seven children were  
16 removed from the data set due to either excessive noise in the EEG signal or extremely low  
17 scores in several tasks. The final sample comprised 86 children (mean = 9.7 years; 43 boys).  
18 The children were all native French speakers without a diagnosed reading impairment or  
19 neurological disease. The youngest children attended grade 2, meaning that they had at least  
20 one year of formal reading instruction. Seventy-seven of the children were right-handed, six  
21 were left-handed, and three were ambidextrous, as determined by the Edinburgh Handedness  
22 Scales (Oldfield, 1971). Children were recruited through announcements on the university's  
23 website. The research ethics committee at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences  
24 of the University of Geneva approved the study protocol, and written informed consent was

1 collected from the parents of all the participating children. At the end of the experimental  
2 session, each child received a small present and a voucher.

3

## 4 2.2 Tasks and material

5 All the children performed one reading task involving two word lists and two discrete naming  
6 tasks while EEG/ERP recordings were taken.

7

### 8 2.2.1 Reading task

9 Participants overtly read two lists of 20 stimuli as quickly and accurately as possible. Two  
10 reading lists—irregular and regular words—from the Odedys battery (Odedys 2; Jacquier-Roux  
11 et al., 2005) were used. For this test, accuracy scores (the number of correct responses) and  
12 time (the total time per list) were computed. Then, a composite reading score was calculated by  
13 dividing the number of correct responses by the time taken to read the column.

14

### 15 2.2.2 Naming

16 Participants performed letter and picture naming tasks.

17

#### 18 2.2.2.1 Letters

19 Sixteen letters were selected for the letter naming task. Letters were repeated five times,  
20 resulting in a total of 80 experimental trials. Each letter was displayed sequentially in a pseudo-  
21 random order. Letters were presented in uppercase, 48-point, black Arial font in the middle of  
22 a grey screen. Each trial began with a fixation cross presented for 500 ms in the center of the  
23 screen. The fixation cross was then replaced by a grey screen for 200 ms, followed by the letter  
24 for 800 ms. The name of the task (i.e., letter naming) was displayed in white on the grey  
25 background before the example trials began. The scores were determined as the percentage of

1 correct responses and the reaction times (in milliseconds) from stimulus onset to vocal onset.  
2 This task was usually completed within four minutes.

3

#### 4 2.2.2.2 Pictures

5 Sixteen black and white drawings and their corresponding modal names were selected from  
6 French databases (Alario & Ferrand, 1999; Bonin et al., 2003). The stimuli corresponded to 16  
7 words with a maximum age of acquisition at 6 years and high name agreement (mean = 93.6%)  
8 to ensure that the children gave the same name for the same picture. The size of the pictures  
9 was set to 5.26 x 5.26 degrees of the visual field. For the experimental task, the 16 pictures  
10 were repeated 5 times, leading to 80 experimental trials. Each trial began with a fixation cross  
11 presented for 500 ms in the center of the screen. The fixation cross was then replaced by a grey  
12 screen for 200 ms, followed by a picture displayed in the middle of the screen for 2000 ms. As  
13 in the letter naming task, the name of the task was displayed in white on a grey background  
14 before the example trials began. Scores were determined as the percentage of correct responses  
15 and the reaction times from stimulus onset to vocal onset. This task was usually completed  
16 within seven minutes.

17

#### 18 2.3 Procedure

19 For the naming tasks, the children were tested individually in a dimly lit, soundproof  
20 room and seated approximately 60 cm away from a computer screen. The software E-Prime (E-  
21 Studio) was used to present the trials. An experimenter who was sitting behind the child and in  
22 visual contact with another experimenter monitoring the EEG online signal manually triggered  
23 the inter-stimulus interval. This procedure allowed for longer intervals between trials when the  
24 EEG signal became noisy due to movement or when the child commented on a trial. A similar  
25 procedure was used by Cohen et al. (2018). Participants were instructed to name the letter or

1 picture as quickly and accurately as possible. Oral production latencies were systematically  
2 checked with a speech analysis software (Check-Vocal; Protopapas, 2007). Each task began  
3 with two practice trials. A break was offered to each participant in the middle of the  
4 experimental list.

5 For the picture naming task, participants were familiarized with all the pictures and their  
6 corresponding modal names before the experiment. Pictures' modal names were presented  
7 through loudspeakers. To ensure that the child paid attention to the modal name, a simple word–  
8 picture matching task was used. Each picture was paired with another image from the  
9 experimental data set, and the child had to click on the picture corresponding to the name  
10 delivered through loudspeakers. If the choice was incorrect, the name was repeated until the  
11 correct picture was selected.

12 The reading task was performed in paper and pencil format in a different room with one  
13 experimenter after the EEG session.

14

#### 15 2.4 EEG acquisition and pre-analyses

16 EEGs were recorded continuously using the Active-Two Biosemi EEG system (Biosemi  
17 V.O.F. Amsterdam, Netherlands), with 64 channels covering the entire scalp. Signals were  
18 sampled at 512 Hz (filters: DC to 104 Hz, 3 dB/octave slope). Two external channels placed at  
19 the external corner and under the right eye recorded eye movements.

20 Offline, ERPs were bandpass-filtered to 0.2–30 Hz (the second order was a causal  
21 Butterworth filter with -12 dB/octave roll-off) and notch-filtered to 50 Hz and then re-  
22 referenced to the average reference. Using the software Cartool (Brunet et al., 2011), epochs of  
23 251 time frames (491 ms) for letter naming, and 263 time frames (515 ms) for picture naming  
24 were extracted and locked to the stimuli. Only trials with correct responses and valid RTs were  
25 retained. Epochs contaminated by eye blinking, movements, or other noise were rejected and

1 excluded from averaging after visual inspection. As a result, an average of 65 trials (range: 48–  
2 79) per participant were included in the ERP analyses for the letter naming task and an average  
3 of 62 trials (range: 45–76) per participant were included in the ERP analyses for the picture  
4 naming task. Electrodes with signal artifacts were interpolated using 3-D spline interpolation  
5 (Perrin et al., 1987), with an average of seven sites interpolated for each individual ERP for  
6 each task.

7 We used overt naming tasks in this study. It has been shown that artifacts generated by  
8 overt speaking occur in the 50–100 ms preceding vocal onset (Fargier et al., 2018; Ganushchak  
9 et al., 2011; Porcaro et al., 2015). In this study, the average reaction times were 891 ms for  
10 pictures and 645 ms for letters. By analyzing only the first 490 ms in letter naming and the first  
11 515 ms in picture naming, we avoided any time interval that could be modulated by speech  
12 artifacts.

13

#### 14 2.4.1 Analyses

15 Reading score and age were used as independent factors in the analyses of ERPs from  
16 naming tasks. The analyses focused on waveform amplitudes and topographic maps during  
17 periods of stable global electrophysiological signals at the scalp. Individual ERP signals were  
18 analyzed separately for each task. Analyzing amplitudes provides insights into which time  
19 window/component of the ERP signal is affected by age or reading level. If the amplitudes are  
20 low, the results of amplitude analysis are interpreted in terms of the automaticity of the  
21 processing stage corresponding to the component, and if the amplitudes are high, the results are  
22 interpreted in terms of the weakness or difficulty of computing a processing stage (Ciesielski  
23 et al., 2004). By analyzing microstates, we gained insight into the participants' global voltage  
24 distribution at scalp at each time point. Such analysis allows us to differentiate differences in  
25 amplitudes that are related to a difference or shifts in microstates from those that are purely

1 related to amplitudes. A difference in microstates for the same component suggests that  
2 participants varying in age or reading level are not engaged in the same mental processing.  
3 Specific microstates in given time-windows can also be associated with specific brain processes  
4 (Changeux and Michel 2004; Koukkou and Lehmann 1987). By computing the two analyses,  
5 we aimed to determine whether age and reading level similarly affect the naming time course  
6 in terms of amplitudes and of microstates.

7 For waveform amplitudes, parametric multiple regressions were computed at each time  
8 point (every 2 ms), and each electrode's absolute value in the naming tasks was computed with  
9 individual age and reading scores using the STEN toolbox developed by Jean-François Knebel  
10 (<http://www.unil.ch/line/home/menuinst/about-the-line/software--analysis-tools.html>). It  
11 should be noted that age and reading level (which have a correlation of .72) are independent,  
12 non-collinear predictors. The tolerance value between age and reading level is .48, meaning  
13 that 48% of the variance in reading level is not accounted for by age. The variance inflation  
14 factor (VIF) value is within the acceptable range (VIF = 2.08).

15 When correcting for multiple tests, spatial and temporal corrections are better suited for  
16 mass univariate analysis of EEG/ERP data than Bonferroni corrections (for a review, see  
17 Groppe et al., 2011). We therefore combined an alpha set to  $p < .01$  with a temporal and a  
18 spatial criterion: the regression had to be significant for 10 consecutive time frames (i.e., 20  
19 ms) and four clustered electrodes. This revealed the time points at which the participants'  
20 reading score and age predict the ERP amplitudes of letter and picture naming.

21 Microstates analysis was performed with the software RAGU (Koenig et al., 2011) to  
22 determine which periods of stable electrophysiological signals at the scalp are affected by age  
23 and/or reading level. This method is advantageous because the reference electrode is  
24 independent (Michel et al., 2001; Michel et al., 2004) and the method is insensitive to pure  
25 amplitude modulations. In addition, it accommodates the portion of data variance that is

1 common across subjects and does not account for variance that appears to be tied to individual  
2 attributes. Microstate segmentation was performed through cross-validation, which involved  
3 computing microstate models with different numbers of microstate classes based on the average  
4 ERPs for a subset of the participants (training data). These microstate models were then tested  
5 for their predictive value (mean correlation) in relation to the average ERPs of the participants  
6 not included in the models (for a complete description of the procedure, see Koenig et al., 2014).  
7 The final microstates model with the optimal number of microstates is selected based on the  
8 best mean correlation between the two sets of data (training and test datasets) after completing  
9 1000 randomizations of the training data.

10 Next, we analyzed whether age and reading level modulated the microstates recorded during  
11 letter and picture naming. We ran the analysis with the whole sample, using age and reading  
12 level as predictors of the topographic variance in a hierarchical regression model with age  
13 entered at step 1 and reading level entered at step 2 (Table 2)<sup>1</sup>.

14

### 15 3. Results

#### 16 3.1 Behavioral results

17 Overall, children were faster ( $t[86, 2] = 12.801; p < .00001$ ) and more accurate ( $t[86,$   
18  $2] = -3.559; p < .0001$ ) in the letter naming task (mean accuracy = 97%, SD = 3.6; mean reaction  
19 time (RT) = 645 ms, SD = 121) than in the picture naming task (mean accuracy = 94%, SD =  
20 5.7; mean RT = 891 ms, SD = 130).

21 Table 1 shows the correlations between age, reading score, and naming tasks. As  
22 detailed in the table, picture and letter naming measures were significantly correlated with both  
23 age and reading skills.

24

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<sup>1</sup> The stepwise regression analysis was also performed in the other way around, with reading level entered at step 1 and age at step 2.



1 Table 1. Spearman correlation coefficients between the behavioral scores of reading and  
 2 naming

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	–					
2. Reading score	.72 ***	–				
3. Picture naming accuracy	.39 ***	.43 ***	–			
4. Picture naming RT	-.33 **	-.28 *	-.42 ***	–		
5. Letter naming accuracy	.24 *	.21 *	.34 **	-.28 *	–	
6. Letter naming RT	-.63 ***	-.47 ***	-.35 **	.54 ***	-.22 *	–

3 \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

4

### 5 3.2 ERP results

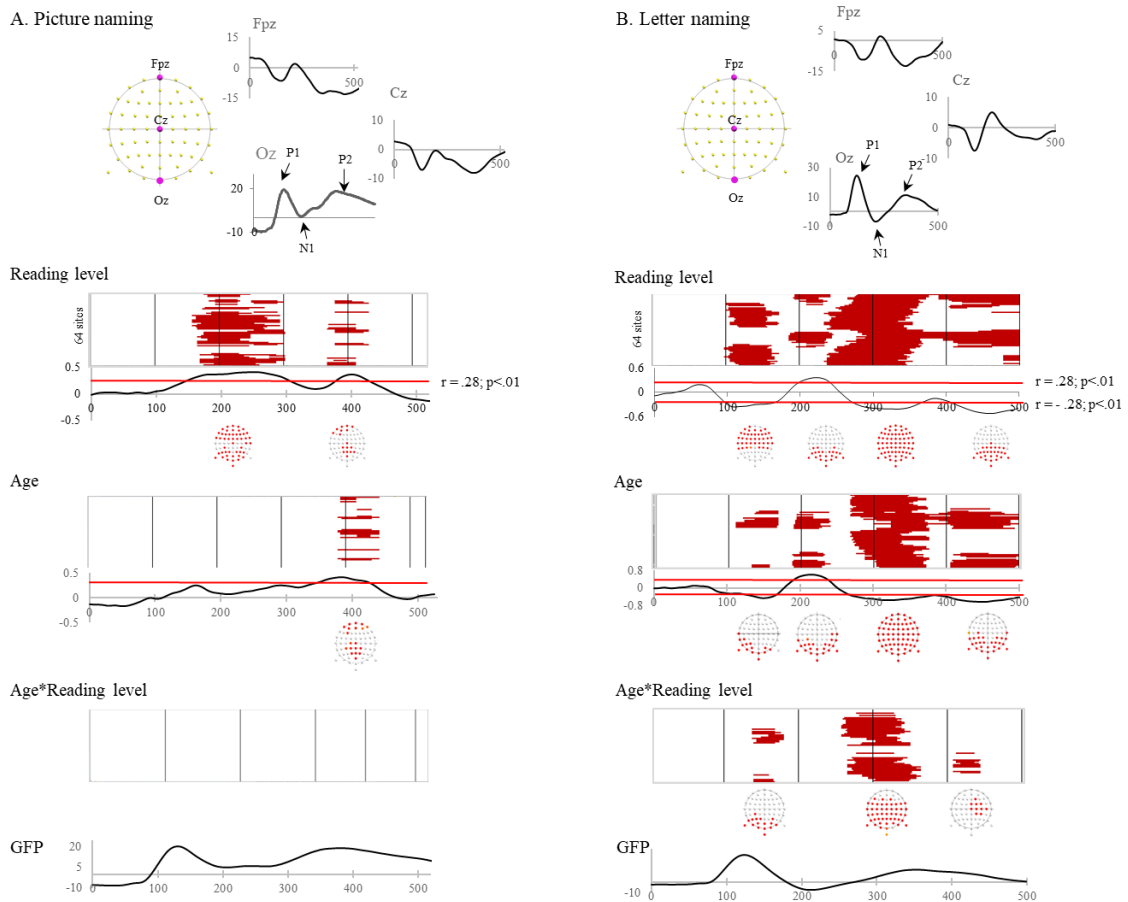
6 Time-point-by-time-point regressions were carried out using ERP amplitudes of letter  
 7 and picture naming tasks as the dependent variables and age and reading score as the predictors.  
 8 Predictors were entered at the same time in a linear regression model, together with the  
 9 interaction term. The results, which are presented in Figure 1, reveal that age and reading score  
 10 are associated with ERP amplitudes in both naming tasks, but in different time intervals for  
 11 picture naming.

12 For picture naming, significant relationships between the reading scores and waveform  
 13 amplitudes appeared in two specific time windows, where better readers showed larger  
 14 amplitudes (see Figure 1A). The first time window (160–295 ms) fell within the N1 time  
 15 interval, and the amplitudes at the anterior and posterior sites were predicted by the reading  
 16 score. In the second time window (380–410 ms), amplitudes were related to reading level at the  
 17 central and frontal left electrodes. In this time window, we also found that age has an effect on  
 18 amplitudes, with older children showing larger amplitudes. The interaction effect between age  
 19 and reading was non-significant.

1

2

Figure 1 about here



3

4 *Figure 1.* Three electrodes (Fpz, Cz, and Oz) are displayed for the picture naming (panel A)

5 and letter naming (panel B) tasks, with components of interest identified. Periods in which the

6 amplitudes were significantly predicted by reading scores and age are highlighted in red, and

7 the associated electrodes are displayed under each time interval. The correlation between

8 reading score or age and amplitude is plotted on P1 for picture naming and on C4 for letter

9 naming. A positive correlation indicates higher amplitudes for better readers. Global field

10 power (GFP) is displayed for each task.

11

12 Regarding letter naming, the results of the regression analysis reveal a large significant

13 relationship between age and reading, modulating amplitudes in several time windows and with

1 a high number of associated electrodes (see Figure 1B). The interaction between age and  
2 reading level was significant in two time windows associated with P1, P2. In the first time  
3 window (P1 time-interval, 140-185 ms), young poor readers were associated with smaller  
4 amplitudes, whereas young good readers were associated with larger amplitudes. In the second  
5 time window (250–370 ms and 410-450 ms, corresponding to the P2 time interval), age and  
6 reading level effects were observed for almost all electrodes, with smaller amplitudes for young  
7 poor readers and higher amplitudes for young good readers. Finally, in the final period  
8 extending until the end of the extracted signal, the amplitudes in posterior sites were predicted  
9 by age and reading level but without interaction. For this last time windows, amplitudes were  
10 smaller for better readers.

11

### 12 3.3 Topographic analysis

13 The topographic analysis used the eight different topographic maps extracted from the  
14 microstate segmentation and analysis (see Figure 2) to examine the letter and picture naming  
15 time courses.

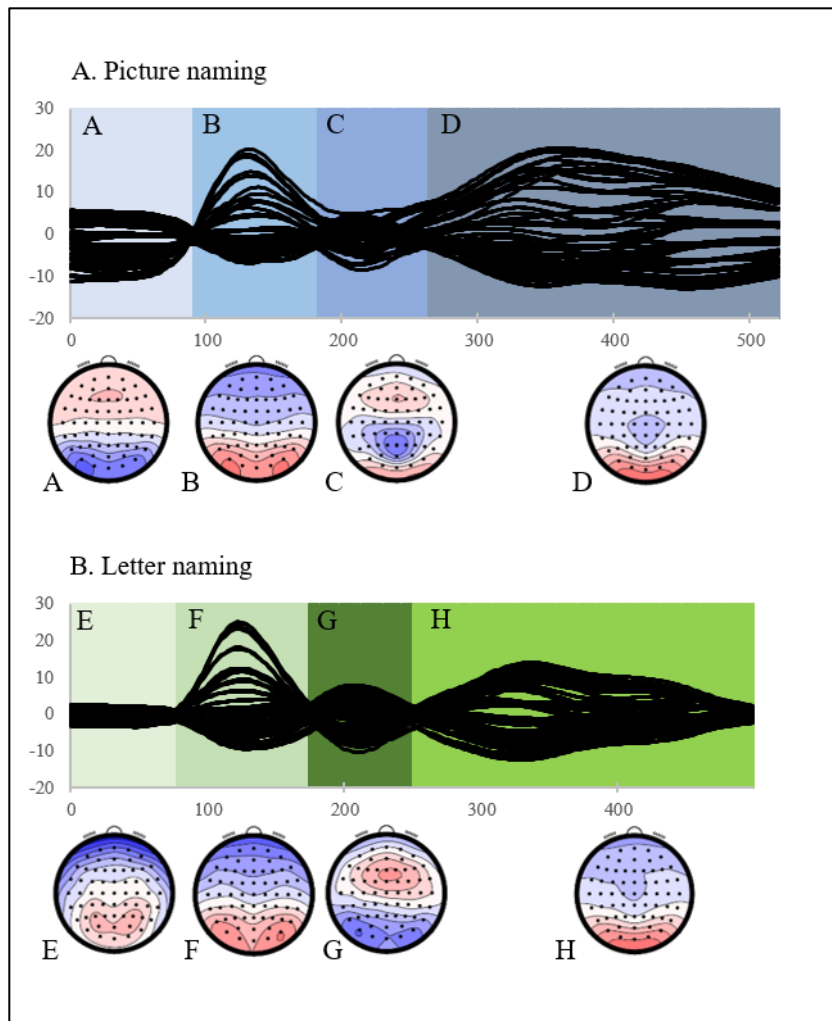
16

17

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Figure 2 about here

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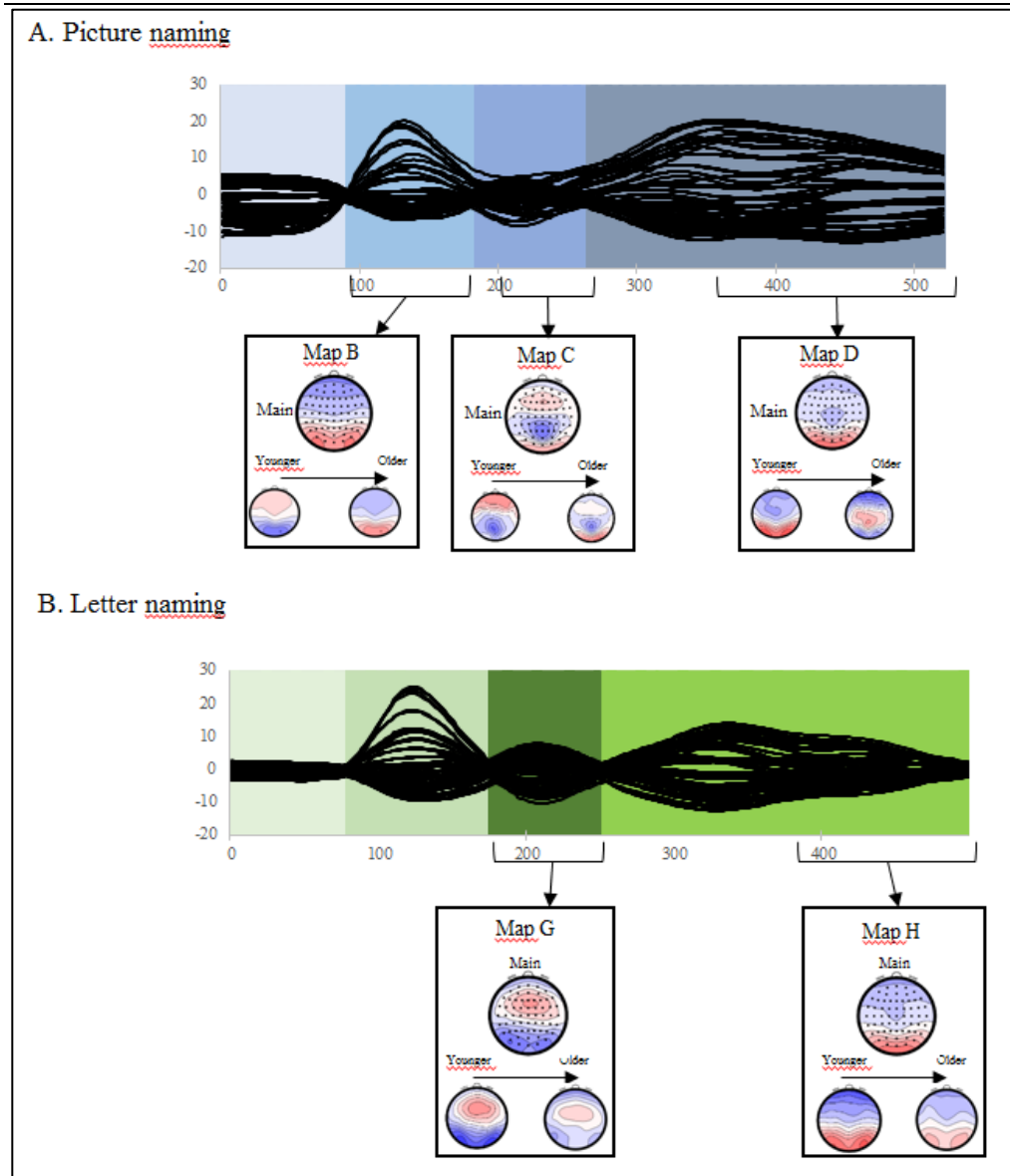
2 *Figure 2.* Group-averaged ERPs (64 electrodes) for picture naming (panel A) from stimulus  
 3 onset to 515 ms and for letter naming from stimulus onset to 490 ms. The temporal distribution  
 4 of the topographic maps was revealed by the microstates analysis with 92% of total explained  
 5 variance for picture naming and 97% for letter naming. Template maps for the eight stable  
 6 microstates are displayed with positive values in red and negative values in blue.

7

8 The effects of age and reading level on each of the microstates elicited along the time  
 9 course of each task were analyzed with a hierarchical regression approach, with age at step 1  
 10 and reading level at step 2 (see Table 2 and Figure 3). The analysis was also run the other way  
 11 around, with reading level at step 1 and age at step 2 revealing that reading level does predict  
 12 topographic variance if considered alone but does not account for topographic variance beyond

1 the contribution of age (does not add explained variance when age is taken into account first).  
 2 Overall, age predicts most of the topographic variance. Specifically, age predicts topographic  
 3 variance from P1 to the end of the analyzed period in picture naming, but in time-intervals  
 4 corresponding to N170 and P2 components in letter naming.

5 Figure 4 about here



6  
 7 *Figure 3.* Effects of age and reading level on microstates for picture and letter naming tasks  
 8 from stimulus onset to 515 ms. Periods of significant modulation of microstates by age are  
 9 indicated with the brackets. As shown in Table 2 reading level did not predict the topographic  
 10 variance beyond age. Positive values are shown in red and negative values in blue.

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Table 2. Hierarchical regression results on the topographic variance for each microstate with age and reading level as predictors.

Map	Independent variable	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> change	β	t
Picture naming task					
Map A	1. Age	.01		-0.28	-0.51
	2. Reading level	.01	--	-10.98	-0.69
Map B	1. Age	.21		-2.26	-2.82**
	2. Reading level	.22	.01	-17.44	-0.77
Map C	1. Age	.12		-5.13	-3.14**
	2. Reading level	.12	--	37.99	0.41
Map D	1. Age	.08		7.44	3.00**
	2. Reading level	.08	--	37.55	0.37
Letter naming task					
Map E	1. Age	.02		-0.01	-0.96
	2. Reading level	.04	.02	-0.47	-1.54
Map F	1. Age	.01		-0.00	-0.49
	2. Reading level	.02	.01	-0.44	-1.04
Map G	1. Age	.08		-0.02	-2.97**
	2. Reading level	.08	--	0.17	0.54
Map H	1. Age	.02		-0.02	-2.01*
	2. Reading level	.03	.01	0.43	1.06

4. Discussion

In this study, we took advantage of the information from EEG/ERP recordings taken during letter and picture naming tasks to specify the processing stages linked to naming as a function of reading level and age. Our results suggest that on the one hand, the entire time-course of letter processing is modulated by age. Reading level affected amplitudes in younger children only, but not in older children. On the other hand, picture naming undergoes specific changes in two time intervals, N1 and late P2. The first interval (N1, falling around 230 ms in children) has been previously associated with visuo-conceptual processes in picture naming (Indefrey, 2011). The second time-window falls on a (late) P2 component, which has previously been

1 associated with lexical processes. Crucially, the N1 time window in picture naming is  
2 specifically related to reading level, while the later time-window is equally related to age and  
3 reading level. In this section, we discuss the findings in relation to the issues raised at the  
4 beginning of this paper: (a) whether letter naming is similarly affected by age and reading level,  
5 and (b) whether picture naming is differentially affected by age and reading level. Finally, we  
6 consider several caveats that possibly limit the conclusions that can be drawn from this work.

7

8

#### 9 4.1 Letter naming

10 Based on previous studies, we expected the entire letter-naming time course to be  
11 affected by age and reading level, without any specific effect on particular processing stages.  
12 The amplitude analysis revealed that age and reading level had general effects on the entire  
13 time course as early as 100 ms after stimulus presentation. The interaction between age and  
14 reading level was significant for the P1 and P2 components. Specifically, young good readers  
15 showed reduced amplitudes during letter processing compared to young poor readers. This  
16 might be due to the fact that younger children show more variance in their reading performance  
17 than older children do. Indeed, younger children in the present study vary from poor to  
18 advanced readers, whereas older children are mostly advanced readers. For the N1 component,  
19 older children (or better readers) showed larger amplitudes than younger children (or poorer  
20 readers). The N1 component is usually associated with letter specification identification,  
21 indicating letter name activation (Madec et al., 2012; Rey et al., 2009). Similar results were  
22 previously reported when comparing children who could or could not read (Maurer et al., 2006).  
23 The N1 amplitude has been shown to increase in children at the beginning of learning to read  
24 and seems to decrease with reading expertise (Brem et al., 2009; Maurer et al., 2011). In the  
25 present study children were included from the very beginning of reading acquisition (i.e. end

1 of grade 1), which could explain that the results on the entire group is similar to Maurer and  
2 colleagues 2006<sup>2</sup>.

3 The microstate analysis took a step further, revealing that only age predicted the  
4 topographic variance during letter naming, specifically for the N1 and P2 components. As no  
5 previous studies that recorded ERPs during letter naming performed such a topographic  
6 analysis, we had no specific hypothesis regarding the microstates elicited during the letter  
7 naming time course. We found that the N1 and P2 components appear to be associated with  
8 different microstates according to age. Overall, ERPs in older children yielded microstates with  
9 an activation of specific areas in central (for N1) and lateral (for P2) sites rather than a general  
10 activation of anterior and central or parietal sites, as observed in younger children. The results  
11 show topographic changes similar to those reported in previous studies using letters. The N1  
12 topography of younger children in the present study is close to the early N1 topography found  
13 in first graders in previous studies (Eberhard-Moscicka et al., 2016). Similarly, older children  
14 in our older group present a topography similar to the one found in adults in previous studies  
15 (Eberhard-Moscicka et al., 2016). The P2 component in letter naming is usually associated with  
16 phonological code retrieval (Madec et al., 2012; Rey et al., 2009). For this component, all  
17 participants showed parietal positivity as well as frontal and central negativity. However, as  
18 children age, they show reduced activation of all sites and specific bi-hemispheric parietal  
19 activation.

20 Taken together, the results on letter naming indicate that age and reading level have  
21 similar effects on amplitudes but that age only predicts topographic variance. Overall, younger  
22 children with a poor reading level show greater neural recruitment during letter naming,  
23 suggesting that letter naming is less automatized and more difficult for them than for children

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<sup>2</sup> We also performed the analyses removing the youngest children of the sample (i.e. below 7;6 years old, n=10) we found a decrease in the N1 amplitudes as reported by previous studies comparing readers at different developmental ages.



1 at the same age with a better reading level (Durstun & Casey, 2006). This outcome aligns with  
2 the previous behavioral literature suggesting that letter processing automaticity develops during  
3 the first years in which children learn to read (Papadopoulos et al., 2016; Savage et al., 2007;  
4 Scarborough, 1998; van den Bos et al., 2002). It should be noted that changes in EEG  
5 topographies are typically interpreted as reflecting changes in the underlying source  
6 configuration of the scalp potentials. The present results advocate for a more nuanced  
7 interpretation. Indeed, the type of analysis used in the present study does not allow to state  
8 whether the topographic change is observed because of shifts in processing stages due to  
9 differences in processing speed between younger and older children or whether it is observed  
10 because of changes in the source configuration of the scalp potentials.

11

## 12 4.2 Picture processing

13 Differently from letter naming, age and reading level were associated with specific time-  
14 windows in picture naming. On ERP amplitudes, the results of the present study revealed  
15 independent age and reading level effects on the picture naming time course, in line with results  
16 reported in Cohen et al. (2018). Crucially for our purpose here, reading level is specifically  
17 related to amplitude differences in the N1 time-interval, whereas both reading level and age are  
18 related to amplitudes in the late P2 time interval. This result advocates for a larger and earlier  
19 effect of reading level than age in picture naming. In picture naming, N1 is usually associated  
20 with lexical concept retrieval, and P2 with lemma selection or lexico-semantic retrieval (Aristei  
21 et al., 2011; Costa et al., 2009; Indefrey, 2011; Maess et al., 2012; Laganaro et al., 2012). Taken  
22 together, the results on ERP amplitudes suggest that age is specifically related to lexical-  
23 semantic processes and reading level is already related to picture naming during visuo-  
24 conceptual processing stages. The close ties between naming and reading were previously  
25 reported with the implication of the VWFA in both tasks (Dehaene-Lambertz et al., 2018; Vogel

1 et al., 2012, 2014). Of importance, the VWFA literature stated on the independence of age and  
2 reading level, as illiterate adults do not show activation in the VWFA when confronted to print  
3 (Dehaene et al., 2015). Our results suggest that the N1 component in picture naming is  
4 specifically linking reading acquisition and naming performance, independently of age. The N1  
5 component has previously been associated with the activation of the VWFA (Brem et al., 2006;  
6 Proverbio, Zotto, & Zani, 2006). Moreover, it has been shown that the VWFA develops by  
7 recruiting neuronal areas previously dedicated to object recognition (Dehaene-Lambertz et al.,  
8 2018; McClandiss et al., 2003). Thus, modulations of the N1 component during picture naming  
9 seem to be related to changes in the activation of the VWFA with reading acquisition.

10

11 A further step was taken with the topographic analysis. First, it revealed that only age  
12 was accounting for the topographic variance during naming for both letters and pictures.  
13 Second, it allowed a better understanding of unexpected effects on the amplitude analysis. As  
14 described above, the amplitude analysis revealed higher amplitudes for N1 and P2 among  
15 advanced readers. This pattern was unexpected as older participants usually show lower  
16 amplitudes. Lower amplitudes could be interpreted as the result of higher automaticity during  
17 a task (Durston & Casey, 2006), or as the result of anatomical changes at scalp as the skull  
18 grows. In the present study, the topographic analysis allowed a better understanding of this  
19 difference in amplitudes by revealing that older children display a different topography during  
20 the N1 and P2 components compared to younger children. We observed a complete shift from  
21 frontal activation in younger children to parietal positivity in older children in the N1 time-  
22 interval. For each of the three topographic maps younger and older children display  
23 topographies which have been reported in shifted time-windows in younger and older children  
24 (see Laganaro et al. 2015), compatible with faster processing speed in older children or with  
25 processes closer to adults in this group. We observed a similar shift in the P2 time-interval, with

1 again different topographies for younger and older children. Interestingly, the microstate for  
2 older children at the end of P2 time-interval is similar to the microstate usually associated with  
3 pre-articulatory processes (see for instance Laganaro, 2017; Jouen, Lancheros & Laganaro,  
4 2020). This suggests that the difference in microstates here is related to the fact that older  
5 children are faster at naming pictures than younger children are. Younger children display the  
6 same topography during the entire P2 time-interval whereas older children display two different  
7 topographies in this time-interval. As mentioned above, change in EEG topographies is usually  
8 interpreted as reflecting changes in the underlying source configuration of the scalp potentials.  
9 However, the present results do not allow to disentangle between this standard interpretation  
10 and an interpretation taking into account the difference in processing speed among children.  
11 The topographic change observed here could reflect changes in the underlying source  
12 configuration of the scalp potentials or could reflect similar topographies but differently  
13 distributed across the time-course due to a faster processing in older children.

14 In summary, the results for picture naming suggest that picture processing is tied to  
15 reading efficiency in a specific time-window, namely the N1 component. The large effect of  
16 reading level on N1 indicates specific modulation of the visuo-conceptual processing stages as  
17 reading efficiency develops, independent of age. This specific reading level effect on N1  
18 suggests that N1 might reflect the activation of the VWFA during picture naming.

19

#### 20 4.3 Limitations

21 The present findings must be considered in light of certain limitations. First, our  
22 interpretation of the results is based on models of the dynamics of picture- and letter-naming  
23 processing. However, these dynamics are estimated for adults; as the children in this study have  
24 longer reaction times, the processing stages may need to be rescaled (Roelofs & Shitova, 2016).  
25 For picture naming, adults are expected to complete visual-conceptual (during the first 190 ms),

1 lexical-semantic (from about 190–270 ms), lexical-phonological (from about 270–450 ms) and  
2 phonetic encoding (from about 450–600 ms; Indefrey, 2011). In our sample, the average  
3 reaction time for picture naming is 891 ms. Consequently, the dynamics of the processing of  
4 phonological code retrieval take place beyond the signal we analyzed (from about 550–700  
5 ms). This long response times prevents us from discussing the “later” stages of the picture  
6 naming task. For letter naming, adults usually complete visual analysis during the first 150 ms,  
7 identify letters around 170 ms, and access phonological code around 250 ms after stimulus  
8 presentation (Madec et al., 2012; Rey et al., 2009). In our sample, the average reaction time for  
9 letter naming is 645 ms. Rescaling the dynamics of the processing would result in the N1 being  
10 delayed to around 200 ms and P2 being delayed to around 350 ms after stimulus onset. This  
11 would enable discussion of the phonological processes involved in letter naming.

12         Second, our data are cross-sectional. We do not know if children identified as beginning  
13 reader in our study will still show a “beginning” reader topography for N1 during a picture  
14 naming task one or two years later or if they will progressively shift toward the profile  
15 corresponding to his/her age. Future studies should follow children from grades 2–5 and record  
16 EEG data on naming and reading processes. This would be one way to understand how age-  
17 related changes at the brain level interact (or not) with changes related to reading efficiency  
18 development.

19

20

## 21 5. Conclusion

22         Our results suggest that the development of reading fluency has an effect on naming tasks,  
23 confirming the close ties between reading and naming, The effect of reading level can be  
24 distinguished from the effect of age, advocating for a relative independence of age and reading  
25 level. Of importance, reading level affects early components in picture naming whereas age

1 affects time-intervals beyond the P1/N1 complex. Picture and letter naming are not similarly  
2 modulated by reading level and age. Our results suggest that picture naming continues to  
3 undergo specific changes throughout reading acquisition independently of age on visuo-  
4 conceptual and lexico-semantic processing stages. By contrast, letter naming is modulated by  
5 age on its entire time-course with a reading level effect only in the youngest participants.

6

7

## 8 Acknowledgements

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10 The STEN toolbox (<http://www.unil.ch/line/home/menuinst/about-the-line/software--analysis->  
11 [tools.html](http://www.unil.ch/line/home/menuinst/about-the-line/software--analysis-tools.html)) was programmed by Jean-François Knebel (the Laboratory for Investigative  
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