

## What individual differences affect the acquisition of foreign language vocabulary?

### What this research was about and why it is important

In order to understand authentic foreign language (FL), a broad vocabulary knowledge is essential. Nowadays, we know a lot about the effective application of incidental as well as intentional learning. However, the cognitive (such as orthographic learning abilities) and affective (such as motivation) skills that support them are still poorly understood. Therefore, the study investigated individual cognitive and affective variabilities in word learning and the mechanisms predicting learning outcomes. Participants were exposed to Welsh words in intentional and incidental learning, and they completed cognitive and affective measures. The results indicated that individual differences significantly contribute to the acquisition of FL words.

### What the researchers did

- Data from 132 native English speakers with no prior knowledge of Welsh were analysed.
- Over the period of two days, individual differences in FL learning were examined with the use of a mix of learning situations. Participants completed the learning, recognition, recall, cognitive, and affective tasks.
- For the incidental (informal) learning, a letter-search task was conducted. Participants were presented with a letter and then with an auditory and written word as well as a picture illustrating the meaning. They were asked to decide whether the letter was present in the Welsh word.
- For the intentional learning, participants were presented with Welsh words and pictures and asked to memorise as many words as they could.
- For the recall task, participants were presented with auditory and written Welsh words and asked to type the English translation.
- For the recognition task, for each auditory and written Welsh word a possible English translation was presented, and participants had to indicate whether it was correct.
- Cognitive tasks tested one's short-term and working memory, phonological and orthographic abilities, and executive functions, whereas affective tasks included confidence in one's ability as well as motivation questionnaires. Additionally, the knowledge of the native language was examined.

### What the researcher found

- Auditory/phonological processing, sensitivity to orthographic regularities in language, and the level of knowledge of native language support both the intentional and incidental FL learning.
- Short-term and working memory are more important in the intentional learning process.
- Individual differences in motivation to learn FL and confidence in one's ability did not influence the outcomes of the learning tasks. However, it might be due to the short nature of the learning session.

### Things to consider

- As learners in any classroom are considerably differentiated when it comes to memory and cognitive abilities, it is recommended to include a wide range of activities relying on both intentional and incidental learning.
- Auditory, as well as visual presentations of new words might be supportive of FL acquisition.
- The richer the knowledge of native vocabulary the easier the learning of FL. It may be a result of having meaning representations and an extended semantic network.

**Material, data, open access article:** [open access article](#)

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