

The positive relationship between out-of-school exposure and vocabulary knowledge

What this research was about and why it is important

Foreign language learners need to develop a large vocabulary to be able to read and understand the language they are learning. Given the limited classroom time available, researchers have repeatedly advocated contact with the foreign language outside the classroom to increase learners' vocabulary size. In this study, the researchers explored how out-of-school contact with a foreign language can contribute to learners' vocabulary knowledge. The researchers compared Flemish learners' vocabulary knowledge and out-of-school contact with two foreign languages—French and English. Flemish learners start learning French at school at the age of 10–11 and English at the age of 13–14. However, unlike French, English is omnipresent in Flemish society in terms of subtitled movies, television, songs, and Internet content. The researchers found that instruction was beneficial for vocabulary learning, but that the earlier start for French at school could not compensate for the large amounts of out-of-school English input, which explained why learners' vocabulary in English was consistently larger than their vocabulary in French.

What the researchers did

- The researchers tested 138 Flemish speakers in Flanders (Belgium), testing these learners' vocabulary knowledge in French (their first foreign language) and English (their second foreign language). The three groups were:
 - 48 14-year-old learners in the second grade of secondary education;
 - 43 16-year-old learners in the fourth grade of secondary education; and
 - 47 19-year-old learners in their first year at university.
- The researchers also asked the learners how much they engaged with French and English outside the classroom.

What the researchers found

- The learners frequently engaged with English outside of the classroom, but only rarely with French, even though it is an official language in Belgium and their first foreign language at school.
- The learners mainly experienced out-of-school contact with English through television, the Internet, and computer games. They did not often engage in reading activities, although university learners read more in English than secondary school learners did.
- In the three age groups, the learners' vocabulary knowledge in English was consistently larger than in French in spite of fewer years of English instruction.
- Even after eight years of instruction, many learners were not familiar with the 2,000 most frequent words in French, which meant that they could do little with the language in terms of reading, listening, speaking, or writing.
- Although a larger vocabulary size was related to more years of instruction, both for French and for English, the learners' vocabulary knowledge in English was also positively related to their out-of-school online activities (gaming, Internet).

Things to consider

- In spite of the beneficial effects of instruction, formal instruction of 2–4 hours per week was not enough to make large learning gains for the learners in this study because the learners needed large amounts of language input to develop a large vocabulary size.
- These findings confirm the knowledge shared by many language teachers, namely, that foreign language learners need to be guided in engaging with the foreign language outside of the language classroom.
- The researchers propose a principled approach to foreign language vocabulary teaching, in which a vocabulary learning plan is included in foreign language curricula.

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