

How do words and pictures help the informal acquisition of foreign language vocabulary?

What this research was about and why it is important

Learning a foreign language (FL) leads to many advantages, from cultural awareness to improved chances of standing out in the labour market. Nevertheless, a constant struggle is the acquisition of new vocabulary. Many learners try to increase their informal exposure to FL words through watching FL films with subtitles, where they are presented with FL soundtrack, native language (NL) subtitles and images. This research project examined how this combination of auditory FL, written NL and pictures facilitate vocabulary learning. Results indicated that informal exposure to this combination of stimuli can positively influence vocabulary learning and that pictures play a special role.

What the researchers did

- 53 native English speakers with no prior knowledge of the FL (Welsh) participated.
- Phase 1, informal exposure, was completed on the first day of the experiment and only by the experimental group. Participants were exposed to FL words through a letter-search task whilst their eye-movements were recorded. They first saw a letter, and then a written NL words and had to indicate whether the word contained the letter. Sometimes participants heard only a FL word, sometimes they heard it and saw a written translation in the NL, or they experienced both conditions with a picture illustrating the meaning.
- Phase 2, intentional learning, took place the next day by both the experimental and control group, where they had to complete a translation recognition task. Being presented simultaneously with an FL auditory word and right or wrong NL written translation, the participants were asked to decide whether the translation was correct. They received feedback in order to learn the correct word pairs.
- Phase 3, the test phase, was run one week later with both groups participating in a recall and a translation recognition test. The recall part required typing the English translations after hearing FL words, while the translation recognition task was the same as in phase 2 but no feedback was provided.

What the researcher found

- The informal exposure to FL words in the letter-search task lead to better performance in the intentional learning task the day after the experiment as well as the recall task one week later.
- In the recall task, the best results were obtained for FL words presented auditorily with written NL translation **and pictures** during the informal exposure.
- The longer participants looked at the pictures, the better their recall and recognition was.

Things to consider

- The processing of pictures activates semantic (meaning) and lexical (orthographic and phonological) word representations which supports learning by creating stronger links between the FL word forms and meanings. Therefore, pictures can play an important role in supporting informal vocabulary learning.
- Access to meaning is faster and more direct for pictures than for words, and as pictures are more varied and distinctive they can be a stronger cue to support learning.
- Combining the FL auditory words with NL translations and pictures in informal learning was found an effective method of learning FL vocabulary. It remains to be seen whether this is also the case in a more complex situation like a FL film with subtitles.

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

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