

The positive role of out-of-school exposure and word properties in children's vocabulary knowledge

What this research was about and why it is important

Previous research has shown that out-of-school contact with English is beneficial for learning vocabulary by learners of English as a foreign language. However, no study has investigated the relationship between out-of-school contact with English in three age groups who had not received any formal English instruction yet. Further, little is known about the role that different word properties, such as word frequency or abstractness, play in out-of-school learning. So it remains unclear which words are potential candidates for vocabulary learning from out-of-school contact with English prior to instruction. The researchers compared three age groups (age 10, 11, and 12) of Flemish children in terms of their English vocabulary knowledge and their out-of-school contact with English. The researchers found that children can learn English words prior to formal instruction through large amounts of contact with English outside of the classroom. The researchers also found that word-related variables, such as cognateness (similarity between first and second language words, as in *huis*–*house* in Dutch and English), concreteness, and frequency, were more important predictors of word knowledge than learner-related variables, such as out-of-school exposure or vocabulary knowledge in Dutch.

What the researchers did

- The researchers tested 560 Flemish children (10-, 11-, and 12-year-olds) who had not yet received any English lessons on their knowledge of English words and Dutch words, using age-appropriate tests of word meaning recognition and word meaning recall.
- The researchers also asked how often the children had contact with English outside of the classroom through their exposure to movies, TV, gaming, etc.

What the researchers found

- The researchers found that children in Flanders had large amounts of out-of-school contact with English through television, the Internet, and computer games, even before receiving formal instruction in English.
- They also found that as learners got older, they more frequently watched TV and played video games in English.
- They found that children could pick up a considerable number of words from out-of-school English and that children's vocabulary knowledge increased significantly, as they got more contact with English.
- Watching TV and playing computer games were important predictors of these children's vocabulary knowledge.
- However, word-related properties were more important predictors of word knowledge. Some words were easier to learn than others, namely, cognate words, concrete words, and frequent words.
- Moreover, the relationship between word knowledge and frequency became stronger with age, which might indicate that learners got more sensitive to frequency patterns as they had more contact with English language input.

Things to consider

- The findings show the potential of out-of-school contact with English for learning English words, even when children have not yet received any formal instruction.
- Because children like watching English language TV and playing games in English, these types of input offer great potential for learning.
- The findings also show that word characteristics influence the learning process. Children can recognize and take advantage of formal similarities between words (that is, their cognate status) with which they are familiar. Children's knowledge of a closely related language (Dutch) that shares many cognates with English helped them build a large vocabulary size.

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