

The impact of different input activities on grammar learning for beginning language learners

What this study was about and why it is important

To what extent do different types of input activity (i.e., reading and listening) impact the learning of French verb inflections (endings)? The researcher found that students who did Processing Instruction (see below) scored higher on tests than those who did Enriched Input activities. The effect applied particularly clearly to scores on listening and reading tests.

What the researcher did

- Participants were 13-14 year old students in UK secondary schools.
- In Experiment 1, 27 13-14 year olds were split into two matched groups, each of which did different types of activities.
- In Experiment 2, two classes were used: One class (29 students) was split into two matched groups (as in Experiment 1), and the other class was a control group (30 students) that only took the tests, but did not do the activities. Before the study, the learners in Experiment 2 had experienced more explicit grammar teaching than those in Experiment 1, and they scored higher on the grammar tests at the start of the study.
- There were two kinds of listening and reading (input) **activities**: Learners undertaking **Processing Instruction** had to complete activities which required paying attention to the grammar (e.g. by matching the verb ending to the subject or to indicate whether the action was in the past or present; see Example 1). Those undertaking **Enriched Input** did not *have* to pay attention to the verb endings (see Example 2). Processing Instruction and Enriched Input groups encountered the same number of target verb inflections and all received the same explicit grammar explanation at the beginning.
- Students were given **listening, speaking, reading & writing tests** before, just after, and a few weeks after the experimental activities (weeks 1 & 2, 10 & 11, and 24 & 25). Experimental activities lasted 9.5 hours; weeks 12-23 were normal classes.

Processing Instruction. Example 1: The following sentences have become jumbled. Underline who you think does the activities:

1. Le chat/ les parents promène le chien [The cat/the parents walks the dog]
2. L'enfant/les hommes travaillent dans une banque [The child/the men work in a bank]

Enriched Input. Example 2: Tick if you think the following activities are normal; write '!' if you think they are a bit weird:

1. Le chat promène le chien [The cat walks the dog]
2. Les hommes travaillent dans une banque [The men work in a bank]

What the researcher found

- **Experiment 1:** Learners who did Processing Instruction activities got higher scores in all tests in weeks 10 & 11 and 24 & 25. Those who did Enriched Input activities did not make significant gains; this suggests that those learners did not explicitly use grammar to understand sentences which contained other clues (e.g. subjects, time adverbs) to meaning.
- **Experiment 2:** Learners in the Enriched Input group showed no difference compared to the control group in the listening and reading tests. Learners in the Processing Instruction group got higher scores than control in these two tests. However, learners in the Enriched Input group seemed to make gains in the production tests that were similar to the Processing Instruction group. This was perhaps because they were used to explicit grammar teaching and they benefited from the explicit grammar instruction followed by lots of examples in the input.

Things to consider

- The sample size was small. Findings cannot necessarily be generalised, or applied to other languages.
- Knowledge was tested *after* the activities, so we can't know exactly what knowledge was used *during* the activities.
- Processing Instruction had two activity types (referential & affective), which may have different effects on learning.
- There could have been a test effect in the oral test in Experiment 2: learners could have learned through taking the test.

Materials available from www.iris-database.org/

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