

To what extent does pupils' ability to sound out words affect their motivation to continue with the study of the language?

What this research was about and why it is important

Previous research has found low levels of motivation amongst English learners of French. This study examined the effect upon motivation of: (a) pupils' ability to sound out words correctly when reading; and (b) pupils' confidence in their own ability to do this. The study also examined pupils' attribution of the difficulties inherent in this task, e.g. to the teacher or teaching method, to their own level of effort, or to the language itself. After three years of learning French, pupils on average were not able to sound out French words accurately, even though many reported using sounding out as a learning strategy. Around half of the pupils attributed their difficulties to the "strangeness" of the French language, rather than to the teacher or the teaching method, perceiving success to be down to chance rather than within their control. The authors suggest that this perception may have a negative impact upon pupils' motivation to continue with the study of the language.

What the researchers did

- A large, random sample of schools representative of English secondary schools in general was obtained. Pupils covering the full ability range in the first, second and third years of secondary education (aged 11-12, 12-13 and 13-14 years respectively) were selected to participate in the study.
- Participants completed a rhyme test assessing their ability to sound out French words correctly, e.g. by stating whether two words such as "bonjour" and "bonheur" rhyme or not, and also a test assessing their ability to identify distinct syllables in French words by drawing lines between the syllables – e.g. "s t y l o" would be divided to give "s t y / l o".
- Participants also completed a written questionnaire. Questions included:
 - Whether (beforehand) they thought they would get the test answers right, and afterwards whether they thought they had got them right, to assess their own perceived level of ability.
 - The extent to which pupils thought that they normally sounded out words in their head.
 - Their attitudes towards learning French, their intentions regarding continuing with the subject, and their attribution of the inherent difficulties (e.g. to the teacher, their own ability level, or the "strangeness" of the language per se).

What the researchers found

- No real difference was found in performance between the first two year groups on the rhyme test; pupils in the third year group performed slightly better. However, pupils still only averaged around half of the questions correct. On the word syllable test, each older year group performed a little better than the previous year group.
- Most pupils in all year groups reported sounding out words in their head, yet around two thirds predicted that they would not be successful in the tests; the same proportion indicated a perceived lack of success after the tests.
- Almost half attributed difficulties to the difference between French and English and French looking "weird", attributing success to "luck" or "chance". Around 40% did not believe that they could improve by trying harder.
- Those who did better on the sounding out and syllable division tests were more likely to rate themselves as competent in this task and to have positive feelings about the language. These pupils were more likely to opt to continue with the subject in the future.

Things to consider

- Pupils in general appeared to be far from mastering the sound system of French, even after three years of study.
- At present, pupils are mainly expected to pick up the rules about sounding out words in French through the various language activities in which they are engaged, without any explanation from the teacher. Putting a greater teaching focus upon the rules for sounding out words may improve pupil's ability and ultimately their motivation.
- This was a study conducted with three different age groups at the same time, rather than by tracking a cohort through three years of learning the language. Progress between the year groups therefore has to be inferred. However, the study was of a sufficient scale for us to conclude that the findings are probably fairly representative.