

Draft- not to be circulated or cited

Which methods of vocabulary learning are most effective with beginner learners?

What this research was about and why it is important

Previous research on this topic identified that vocabulary memorisation strategies requiring deeper processing resulted in better retention of words than strategies involving shallower processing. Moreover, teaching beginner learners techniques that involved deeper processing proved more effective than when learners used strategies of their own choice. This study further built on these ideas and specifically investigated the effectiveness of three L2 vocabulary learning methods: **rote learning** (committing to memory the L1 translation of a new L2 word by rehearsal), **semantic mapping** (the creation of a diagram with L1 words related by meaning to the new L2 word) and **keyword mnemonics** (associating the new L2 word with an L1 keyword that is similar in sound or when written and then connecting the L1 keyword with the L1 translation of the L2 word). The results showed that vocabulary learning techniques requiring deeper processing through form and meaning associations (i.e the keyword method) led to the best retention. However, rote memorisation (requiring shallower processing) of L1-L2 equivalents was more effective than the deeper processing method of creating multiple meaning associations (i.e. semantic mapping).

What the researchers did

- The researchers investigated the effectiveness of three vocabulary learning methods among 778 beginner learners of Spanish. Each learner was required to learn the same 24 words, grouped into three sets of eight. This allowed for one set of words for each of the three methods. The presentation order of the sets of eight was varied to allow for coverage of all 24 words across the three methods.
- The participants were tested beforehand to ensure they had not learned any of the target words before experiencing the teaching. They were tested after the teaching to assess the short-term effect and undertook a test after three weeks to determine the long-term impact of the different methods.

What the researchers found

- With these beginner learners the keyword method was more efficient than rote memorisation and semantic mapping to learn and remember new L2 words. Rote memorisation was better than semantic mapping.
- In the keyword method, participants used a keyword that looked like the target word only 1% of the time, whereas they used a keyword that sounded like the target word 99% of the time.
- The beginner learners preferred to generate direct keyword links, rather than multiple links, as this tied in with their preference for choosing simpler ways of learning L2 vocabulary.

Things to consider

- Providing beginner learners with a keyword or suggesting that they create a keyword when presenting new vocabulary aids learning. The L1 keywords words should sound similar to the L2 words e.g. rug sounds similar to *oruga* (caterpillar). The connection between the L1 keyword with the L1 translation ought to be a direct single link e.g. caterpillars walk on rugs, rather than multiple links *oruga*: Oregon; University of Oregon has green colours, caterpillars are green.
- This research could be replicated with more advanced L2 learners to determine whether they learn better with rote memorisation or the keyword method. It would also be interesting to examine if proficient students with better developed networks in the L2 would be able to benefit from semantic mapping more than beginner learners.
- Whilst semantic mapping might not be the best application of the associative-based technique, it may be beneficial to consider investigating other such techniques to find out which of these is most effective.
- Further research on the longer term effects of all three methods above what this study offered, using both recognition and production tests is warranted, coupled with discerning the role of additional learning practice alongside the vocabulary learning methods.
- More than 15% of the participants in the original sample pool had to be excluded from the study for not learning the words using the methods specified. This reveals that instructing learners to use a specific vocabulary learning method does not always imply that they will. Should learners therefore be asked to supply explicit evidence of the learning process? And if so, could/should this be built into the teaching sequence?

How to cite this summary: Hobson, V., Sagarra, N. & Alba, M. (2019). Which methods of vocabulary learning are most effective with beginner learners? *OASIS Summary of Sagarra & Alba (2006) in The Modern Language Journal*. <https://oasis-database.org>
This summary has a [CC BY-NC-SA license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).