

Lexical knowledge as the key to early second language listening and reading success

What this research was about and why it is important

The extent to which lexical mastery comprises interrelated types of lexical knowledge has been widely studied. However, less is known about how word knowledge relates to lexical processing (that is, how quickly and automatically learners can access their knowledge) and how these two dimensions differently contribute to second language (L2) listening and reading comprehension. Indeed, prior research has shown that certain types of lexical knowledge have stronger relationships with L2 comprehension than others. However, most studies have focused on intermediate-to-advanced adult learners of English. As such, the extent to which similar patterns pertain among younger learners of languages other than English in the early stages of learning is less clear. Our study therefore investigated the relationships between types of lexical knowledge and processing and their contributions to L2 listening and reading scores among 218 beginner-to-low-intermediate learners of French in England who were 15 to 16 years old. We found that lexical knowledge and processing were largely independent of each other and that lexical knowledge (but not processing) strongly predicted listening and reading scores.

What the researchers did

- We tested 218 15-to-16-year-old English-speaking learners of French on their mastery of 50 high-frequency, curriculum-aligned words shortly after they had taken their GCSEs (high-stakes national exams in England). Most learners achieved the highest GCSE levels (i.e., Levels 7 to 9, where 9 is the highest).
- Lexical mastery in the written modality was assessed in terms of: (a) lexical knowledge, via tests of (i) meaning recognition (matching the L2 word to its English definition), (ii) form recognition (deciding whether an L2 word is real or not), and (iii) form recall (producing the L2 word from its translation in the first language) and (b) lexical processing, via the (i) speed (mean response time) and (ii) stability and automaticity (i.e., coefficient of variation) of form recognition.
- To measure listening and reading comprehension, we (a) administered the listening and reading tests from the A2 junior version of the Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française (DEL F; a standardized measure of French proficiency, unfamiliar to the students) and (b) collected the learners' GCSE listening and reading exam scores.
- We explored the relationships between measures of lexical knowledge, lexical processing, and listening and reading comprehension. We also calculated the amount of unique variance (i.e., scatter) in the listening and reading scores that was explained by types of lexical knowledge and processing, both individually and combined.

What the researchers found

- On average, learners knew at least half of the words in each knowledge measure. Meaning recognition was consistently the strongest type of knowledge, followed by form recognition and then form recall.
- There was a high degree of interrelatedness between the three types of lexical knowledge. But there was little (if any) relationship between the knowledge and processing measures, and, where correlations were significant, the effect size was very small.
- Listening and reading scores (GCSE and DEL F) had moderate-to-strong positive correlations with all three types of lexical knowledge but no significant relationship with the two types of lexical processing (speed and stability).
- Lexical knowledge—even when partial in some cases—of this relatively small set of words predicted between 46% and 53% of the variance in listening scores and 55% and 57% of the variance in reading scores. Form recognition explained the most variance in listening and reading scores, generally followed by meaning recognition and then form recall. Processing measures explained only negligible additional variance in the listening and reading scores.

Things to consider

- Our findings suggest that, at this early stage of language learning, lexical knowledge and processing (at least, speed and stability of recognizing real words) may be largely independent dimensions of lexical mastery.
- The high degree of interrelatedness between lexical knowledge and listening and reading scores underscores the importance of high-frequency vocabulary. At these early proficiency levels, teaching high-frequency words in low-exposure classroom contexts may support listening and reading development.
- Our battery of measures was not fully comprehensive. Two obvious gaps are that we did not analyze meaning recall (producing the L1 from the L2) or aural lexical knowledge and processing (while listening and speaking).

Material and data: Materials and data available from <https://osf.io/hmb8y/>

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