

Fun activities can improve language learning, academics reveal

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Playing simple games using words and pictures can help people to learn a new language with greater ease, researchers from The University of Nottingham have shown.

Their study, published by the scientific journal *PLOS ONE*, revealed that using fun, informal ways of [learning](#) not only helped complete novices to acquire a new language but also made more traditional methods of language learning more effective.

PhD student Marie-Josée Bisson of the University's School of Psychology, who led the study along with Drs Walter van Heuven, Kathy Conklin and Richard Tunney, said: "The results of this study have implications not only for language learning and teaching, but also for anyone interested in improving their knowledge of a foreign language.

"They show that informal exposure can play an important role in foreign language word learning. Through informal exposure, learning can occur without intention, in a more effortless manner. Anyone attempting to learn another language would benefit from activities such as simple games using foreign language words and pictures, or foreign language films with subtitles where they can enjoy the activity without focusing on trying to learn the words. The results of this study suggest that these kinds of informal activities can facilitate language learning, even days afterwards."

There are many advantages to learning a foreign language, such as a better understanding of another culture or better [employment prospects](#) in an increasingly multilingual society. However, picking up another language can be a difficult process.

Many [language learners](#) believe that informal learning—for example, watching a foreign language film or spending time in another country immersing oneself in the culture—is helpful for learning the lingo.

This has now been validated by the results of the Nottingham study, which used spoken and written [foreign language](#) words along with pictures depicting their meaning to measure foreign vocabulary learning in complete novices.

In the first phase of the study, English speakers who did not know any Welsh, viewed Welsh words on a computer screen and were asked to indicate whether a particular letter appeared in each word. While viewing the word, they also heard the word being spoken and saw a simple picture showing its meaning. Importantly, the pictures and spoken words were irrelevant to their task and they had not been asked to 'learn' the Welsh words.

In the second phase of the study, English speakers were explicitly asked

to learn the correct translations of Welsh words. They were presented with pairs of written English words and spoken Welsh words and had to indicate each time whether the English word was the correct translation of the Welsh. Information about whether or not their responses were correct was provided so that they could learn the correct translations. Importantly, half of the Welsh words had been presented in the first phase of the study.

Results indicated that participants performed better on the Welsh words they had previously been exposed to, indicating that during their informal exposure they had started to learn the meaning of the Welsh words.

Better performance in the explicit learning task was found immediately after the informal exposure as well as the next day. The researchers found that participants retained knowledge unintentionally learnt during the informal phase even as much as a week later following further explicit learning of the Welsh words.

Provided by University of Nottingham

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