Learning a Language Relates to Ability to Learn Patterns

Learning to understand and read a second language may be driven, at least in part, by our ability to pick up on statistical regularities, reveals a new study from psychological scientists in Israel. The data show that learning a second language reflects a general capacity for learning patterns, rather than just capacities that are language-specific, according to “What Predicts Successful Literacy Acquisition in a Second Language” published in Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

“These new results suggest that learning a second language is determined to a large extent by an individual ability that is not at all linguistic,” says lead researcher Ram Frost of Hebrew University.

In the study, Frost and colleagues used three different tasks to measure how well American students in an overseas program picked up on the structure of words and sounds in Hebrew. The students were tested once in the first semester and again in the second semester.

The students also completed a task that measured their ability to pick up on statistical patterns in visual stimuli. The participants watched a stream of complex shapes that were presented one at a time. Unbeknownst to the participants, the 24 shapes were organized into 8 triplets—the order of the triplets was randomized, though the shapes within each triplet always appeared in the same sequence. After viewing the stream of shapes, the students were tested to see whether they implicitly picked up the statistical regularities of the shape sequences.

The data revealed a strong association between statistical learning and language learning. Students who were high performers on the shapes task tended to pick up the most Hebrew over the two semesters.

According to the researchers, establishing a link between second language acquisition and a general capacity for statistical learning may have broad implications. Learn more at tinyurl.com/frost-hebrew-study.


ACTFL invites you to join your colleagues at a very special pre-convention workshop on Thursday, November 21 from 9:00 a.m.–4:30 p.m. in the Orange County Convention Center.

Many of you may already be familiar with Robert Marzano’s The Art and Science of Teaching and the Highly Engaged Classroom. Workshop trainer and Associate Vice President with the Marzano Research Laboratory, Dr. Phil Warrick will present “The Art and Science of Teaching and 21st Century Skills,” where he will actively engage participants in learning and experiencing research-based instructional elements based on Dr. Marzano’s work.

What helps learners use language to discuss and exchange ideas; understand what they read, hear, or view; or create and present content?

What strategies will develop learners’ use of language at levels that reflect and support the Common Core State Standards?

This workshop will answer these questions and introduce participants to a system of personal and professional evaluation as they reflect on their current instructional practices. The workshop will focus on research-based instructional elements to increase student engagement, provide more time for student talk and collaboration, help students effectively interact with new content, and deepen their understanding of content.

This is only one of the 29 half-day and full-day pre-convention workshops held prior to the opening of the 2013 ACTFL Convention. Learn more online at www.actfl.org/convention-expo/2013-actfl-convention-world-languages-expo/program/pre-convention-workshops.