

Does it matter how often we practise grammar?

What this research was about and why it is important

Providing regular, repeated opportunities to practise grammatical features of a foreign language (FL) is vital for learning, but how often should the practice occur? This study investigated whether the spacing (7-days vs. 3-4 days) between practice sessions influenced learning of verb endings in French by young learners (aged 8 to 11). The results suggested that the spacing of the practice sessions did not influence learning; rather other factors, such as learners' ability to break down and analyze language, and how successfully they engaged with the practice activities themselves, were stronger predictors of learning.

What the researchers did

- 113 beginner learners of French (aged 8 to 11) from 8 primary school classes in England took part in the study
- The classes were separated into three groups:
 - 7-day group, who completed three 60-minute practice sessions, each separated by 7 days
 - 3.5-day group, who completed six 30-minute practice sessions, each separated by 3 to 4 days
 - Control group, who did not complete any practice sessions
- During the [practice sessions](#), the 7-day and 3.5-day groups completed activities on a bespoke computerized grammar game to practise verb endings in French for person and number (I vs. we; he/she vs. they) and tense (present vs. past).
- To measure learning, all three groups completed tests one week before, one week after, and six weeks after the practice.
- The tests included: 1) a [Sentence-Picture Matching task](#), in which learners had to match a sentence to one of two pictures; 2) an [Acceptability Judgement task](#), in which learners had to decide whether each sentence was grammatically correct and if not, to identify and correct the error.
- Learners also completed a [test to measure how well they could analyse language](#), including their knowledge of grammar in their first language, English, and their ability to spot patterns and apply rules in unfamiliar languages.

What the researchers found

- During the practice sessions, the average performance (% correct answers) of both the 7-day and 3.5-day groups was high. However, there was lots of variation within both groups, with some learners answering nearly all questions correctly, but others scoring lower (around 60%).
- On the tests, when looking at the scores of each group as a whole (i.e., the group averages), there were minimal changes in scores across the three test times. However, there was lots of variation between individual learners' scores (for example, some learners' scores increased, whereas others' did not).
- For both the 7-day and 3.5-day groups, the accuracy of performance during the practice sessions predicted scores on the tests (and this prediction was particularly strong for the test carried out one week after the practice).
- For both the 7-day and 3.5-day groups, learners' ability to analyse language predicted scores on the tests (and this prediction was particularly strong for the Acceptability Judgement task).

Things to consider

- No advantage for either the 7-day or 3.5-day group was found, suggesting that the spacing between practice sessions did not influence learning for our young FL learners on this set of grammar features.
- The accuracy of individual learners' performance during the practice sessions and the individuals' ability to analyse language influenced learning in both the 7-day and 3.5-day groups. This suggests an important role for 'analytic ability' and the importance of considering how individual learners will respond to instruction.
- The amount of practice was relatively short (180 minutes) and included six French verb endings. These may be some of the reasons why we did not observe greater improvement for the 7-day and 3.5-day groups as a whole.
- The learning tests focused only on comprehension. In addition, due to time constraints in the classrooms, the tests contained only a small number of items, meaning that the Sentence Matching test, in particular, may not have been a robust measure of the learners' grammatical knowledge.
- Future studies could include a larger amount of practice and more varied and robust learning tests.

Materials and data available from <https://www.iris-database.org/>

How to cite this summary: Kaspruwicz, R.E. & Marsden, E. (2019). Does it matter how often we practice grammar? *OASIS Summary* of Kaspruwicz, Marsden, & Sephton (2019) in *The Modern Language Journal* <https://oasis-database.org>

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