

USING VISUAL AIDS TO ENHANCE VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This article examines the effectiveness of using visual aids in teaching French as a foreign language in increasing vocabulary. The study was conducted with A1 level learners and analyzed the role of pictures, icons, charts, and other visual materials in memorizing new words, using them in context, and developing active vocabulary. The article compares the results of the experimental and control groups, proving that visual aids can increase motivation and enhance efficiency in the learning process.

Keywords: Vocabulary development, A1 level, demonstration methodology, motivation, visual materials in the classroom, teaching vocabulary with pictures, educational effectiveness, modern teaching methods.

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving domain of foreign language pedagogy, vocabulary acquisition has long been recognized as a cornerstone of communicative competence. Mastery of a broad and functional lexicon is essential for learners to effectively express thoughts, comprehend authentic discourse, and participate in meaningful interactions (Nation, 2001). Within the context of teaching French as a Foreign Language (Français Langue Étrangère, FLE), vocabulary development becomes particularly crucial at the A1 level, where learners often struggle with limited linguistic exposure, low retention rates, and a lack of contextual understanding of new words.

To address these challenges, scholars and practitioners have increasingly emphasized the role of multisensory learning and visual support in second language acquisition. Visual aids ranging from static images, flashcards, and illustrations to digital media, mind maps, and realia are widely acknowledged for their capacity to make abstract language more concrete and accessible. The Dual Coding Theory proposed by Paivio (1986) suggests that information processed through both visual and verbal channels leads to stronger memory traces, thereby facilitating vocabulary retention. Supporting this, Mayer (2009) argues that multimedia learning enhances cognitive processing and learner engagement, which is particularly beneficial for beginner level language learners.

Numerous studies have investigated the pedagogical value of visual aids in language instruction. For example, Boulton (2010) explored the use of concordance-based visual tools to support lexical acquisition, while Szabo & Hastings (2016) demonstrated the effectiveness of image-assisted learning in vocabulary retention among teenage ESL learners. In the FLE context specifically, Leclercq (2015) highlighted that visual stimuli not only reinforce memory but also stimulate learner motivation, especially in early stages of instruction. Despite this growing body of research, there remains a paucity of empirical studies that systematically examine how visual aids influence vocabulary acquisition among beginner-level learners of French in structured classroom environments.

Furthermore, much of the existing literature tends to focus on English as a second language (ESL), leaving a noticeable gap regarding the application of visual strategies in FLE settings. As foreign language teachers seek to adapt evidence-based strategies to their linguistic and cultural contexts, understanding the specific effects of visual aids in French vocabulary instruction becomes essential. There is also a need to determine which types of visual materials static, interactive, or context-embedded yield the most significant impact on different dimensions of vocabulary knowledge, including form, meaning, and usage.

METHODS

The study involved a total of 40 beginner level (A1) learners of French as a Foreign Language, aged between 18 and 25, enrolled at a university language center. Participants were randomly assigned into two groups: an experimental group (n=20) that received vocabulary instruction supplemented with visual aids, and a control group (n=20) that experienced traditional vocabulary teaching without visual supports. All participants had comparable prior exposure to French and no significant differences in baseline vocabulary knowledge were confirmed through a pre-test.

The vocabulary items selected for instruction included a set of 50 high-frequency French words relevant to everyday communication themes such as family, food, colors, and common verbs. For the experimental group, visual aids such as illustrated flashcards, picture-word matching charts, and digital slides with images were utilized to reinforce word meaning and contextual usage. The control group used conventional word lists and written definitions without accompanying images.

The instructional intervention lasted for 6 weeks, with two 60-minute sessions per week. Both groups followed the same curriculum content and learning objectives, differing only in the incorporation of visual materials in the experimental group's sessions. Each session began with a brief introduction of new vocabulary, followed by interactive activities such as repetition drills, matching games (for the experimental group, involving pictures), and sentence formation exercises. Post-lesson quizzes were administered to assess immediate retention.

Examples of Visual-Based French Exercises Used in the Experimental Group:

1. **Matching Pictures with Words (Associer les images aux mots):**
Learners receive cards with images (e.g., a red apple, a dog, a house) and separate cards with the corresponding French words (e.g., *la pomme rouge*, *le chien*, *la maison*). Students match images with the correct vocabulary words, reinforcing the association between visual and verbal input.
2. **Flashcard Drills (Exercices avec des flashcards):**
Flashcards displaying an image on one side and the French word on the other are used for rapid recognition and recall drills. For example, a picture of a cat (*le chat*) prompts learners to say or write the word.
3. **Fill-in-the-Blank with Visual Cues (Compléter les phrases avec des images):**
Sentences with missing words are provided alongside images representing the missing vocabulary. For example: *J'ai une _____*. (Image of a dog) - *J'ai un chien*.
4. **Picture-Based Storytelling (Raconter une histoire avec des images):**
Learners are given a sequence of images depicting a simple story and are asked to describe or narrate it using the target vocabulary, encouraging productive language use.
5. **Color and Object Identification (Identifier les couleurs et les objets):**
Using colorful images, students practice naming colors and objects, e.g., *Le ballon est rouge*, *La voiture est bleue*.

To evaluate vocabulary acquisition, a standardized vocabulary test was administered before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the intervention. The test measured both receptive knowledge (recognition of words) and productive skills (use of words in sentences). Additionally, learner motivation and engagement levels were assessed through questionnaires and observational checklists. Statistical analysis comparing pre- and post-test scores between groups was conducted using paired t-tests and ANOVA to determine the significance of differences.

RESULTS

At the beginning of the study, pre-test results showed no significant difference between the experimental group (n=20) and the control group (n=20) in vocabulary knowledge. The experimental group scored an average of 15.3 out of 50 (SD = 3.2), and the control group scored 15.1 (SD = 3.4), indicating baseline equivalence ($t(38) = 0.24$, $p = 0.81$).

After six weeks of instruction, the post-test scores revealed a substantial increase in vocabulary acquisition for both groups; however, the experimental group demonstrated a significantly greater improvement. The mean post-test score for the experimental group was 38.7 (SD = 4.1), while the control group averaged 29.4 (SD =

5.0). An independent samples t-test confirmed this difference as highly significant ($t(38) = 6.89, p < 0.001$), suggesting that visual aids considerably enhanced vocabulary retention.

The experimental group's curriculum incorporated specific French-language exercises that utilized visual stimuli, such as:

- **“Associer les images aux mots”** (Matching pictures with words), which helped learners form direct connections between images and lexical items.
- **“Compléter les phrases avec des images”** (Fill-in-the-blank with visual cues), reinforcing contextual use of vocabulary.
- **“Raconter une histoire avec des images”** (Picture-based storytelling), encouraging active production of language in a meaningful context.
- **“Identifier les couleurs et les objets”** (Color and object identification), aiding lexical categorization and memorization.

Data analysis revealed that students who engaged with these visual-based exercises exhibited not only improved recognition of words (receptive skills) but also superior ability to actively use new vocabulary in oral and written forms (productive skills). Specifically, effect sizes calculated for productive skills (Cohen's $d = 1.25$) were notably higher than those for receptive skills (Cohen's $d = 0.85$), indicating that visual aids strongly facilitated active vocabulary use.

In addition to test scores, qualitative data collected through questionnaires and classroom observations highlighted increased motivation and positive attitudes among learners in the experimental group. Many students reported that the use of pictures and interactive visual activities made vocabulary learning more engaging and less monotonous. The visual stimuli helped anchor new words in memory, making recall easier during speaking and writing tasks.

Teachers' observational notes corroborated these findings, showing heightened participation and enthusiasm during lessons incorporating visual aids and French exercises. Students were more willing to volunteer answers, engage in group activities, and practice new vocabulary spontaneously.

Overall, the findings strongly support the hypothesis that the use of visual aids combined with French language exercises significantly enhances vocabulary acquisition for beginner level FLE learners. The dual impact on both receptive and productive skills, alongside increased learner motivation, underscores the pedagogical value of integrating visual and interactive materials into language teaching methodologies.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the efficacy of visual aids combined with authentic French-language exercises in enhancing vocabulary acquisition among beginner-level learners of French as a Foreign Language (FLE). The results provide compelling

evidence that the integration of multimodal teaching strategies significantly facilitates both receptive and productive vocabulary development, confirming and extending prior research in second language acquisition (SLA) and educational psychology.

The superior performance of the experimental group corroborates the principles of Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986), which emphasizes that information processed through both verbal and visual channels creates stronger and more durable memory traces than verbal information alone. In our study, the pairing of French lexical items with corresponding images in activities such as “*Associer les images aux mots*” and “*Compléter les phrases avec des images*” enhanced learners’ semantic encoding and retrieval. This aligns with Mayer’s (2009) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, which posits that well-designed visual materials reduce extraneous cognitive load and foster meaningful integration of new knowledge.

Notably, the observed greater effect sizes in productive vocabulary skills (oral and written use) suggest that visual aids do more than improve passive recognition—they actively scaffold learners’ ability to retrieve and utilize lexical items in communicative contexts. This is particularly relevant for beginner FLE learners, who frequently encounter difficulties in bridging the gap between receptive understanding and active language production (Nation, 2001). Visual stimuli provide contextual and semantic cues that simplify lexical access and syntactic formulation, thereby lowering the cognitive demands inherent in productive tasks (Sweller, 1988). For example, the “*Raconter une histoire avec des images*” exercise encouraged learners to construct coherent narratives, promoting syntactic fluency alongside vocabulary acquisition.

Beyond cognitive mechanisms, the qualitative findings underscore the affective benefits of visual aids in language learning. Increased learner motivation and engagement, as reflected in questionnaire responses and classroom observations, corroborate Gardner’s (1985) assertion that motivation is a critical predictor of second language learning success. The incorporation of colorful, interactive visual tasks transformed the learning environment into a more stimulating and enjoyable setting, fostering greater persistence and active participation. This motivational boost likely contributed to deeper processing and more frequent rehearsal of lexical items, reinforcing vocabulary retention.

Pedagogically, the study advocates for a multisensory and learner-centered approach in FLE instruction. Traditional vocabulary teaching methods, often relying on rote memorization and textual lists, may be insufficient to meet diverse learner needs. Incorporating visual aids such as illustrated flashcards, picture-word matching, and visual storytelling not only caters to different learning styles but also aligns with communicative and task-based language teaching frameworks that emphasize meaningful use of language in context (Ellis, 2003). Moreover, visual-based exercises

facilitate incidental learning and lexical chunking, which are vital for building automaticity in language use (Schmitt, 2008).

Nevertheless, several limitations should be considered. The relatively small sample size and short duration (six weeks) limit the generalizability of findings and the assessment of long-term retention effects. Additionally, participants were university students with similar educational backgrounds, which may reduce variability but restrict applicability to broader learner populations such as younger students or adults in informal learning contexts. Future research should employ larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs to evaluate sustained impacts. Furthermore, exploring the integration of technology-enhanced visual aids, such as interactive apps and virtual reality, could offer novel insights into optimizing vocabulary instruction.

The present study substantiates the pedagogical value of visual aids combined with authentic French language exercises in vocabulary acquisition at the beginner level. By facilitating dual coding, reducing cognitive load, and enhancing learner motivation, visual aids represent a powerful tool to improve both receptive and productive vocabulary skills. Language educators are encouraged to adopt multimodal instructional strategies to foster more effective and engaging learning environments, ultimately contributing to improved communicative competence in French as a Foreign Language.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the impact of visual aids combined with authentic French-language exercises on vocabulary acquisition among beginner-level learners of French as a Foreign Language (FLE). The findings demonstrate that visual aids significantly enhance both receptive and productive vocabulary skills by providing meaningful contextual cues and facilitating dual coding of verbal and visual information. Such multimodal approaches align with established cognitive theories, notably Paivio's Dual Coding Theory and Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, which emphasize that combining visual and verbal input strengthens memory retention and retrieval.

Furthermore, interactive exercises like "*Associer les images aux mots*" and "*Raconter une histoire avec des images*" contributed not only to vocabulary retention but also to learner motivation and engagement, which are critical factors for successful language acquisition as posited by Gardner's motivation theory. These results highlight the importance of integrating multisensory teaching methods to accommodate diverse learner needs and promote active language use, consistent with communicative and task-based language teaching frameworks.

Despite certain limitations such as the small sample size and short intervention period, the study offers compelling evidence supporting the pedagogical value of visual aids in FLE instruction. It encourages educators to incorporate such materials

systematically to improve vocabulary acquisition and overall communicative competence.

In conclusion, visual aids are effective and indispensable tools in beginner-level French language education, facilitating deeper cognitive processing, reducing learning difficulties, and fostering learner motivation. Their integration into language teaching practice holds substantial promise for enhancing learner outcomes and advancing language proficiency.

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