

# Priming as a Method to Facilitate Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition

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Second language (L2) learners and bilinguals read target words faster when their translation equivalents are presented immediately before (e.g., Keatley & de Gelder 1992; Martin et al., 2009). Moreover, it is believed that L2 learners, particularly those at lower L2 proficiency levels, rely on their first language (L1) to activate corresponding forms in their L2, but not vice versa (Kroll & Stewart, 1994). In studies on lexical processing, the experimental method known as *priming* involves the brief presentation of a word (i.e., a prime) prior to the presentation of a target word. Although priming has been argued to be closely related to the language learning mechanism (e.g., Chang et al., 2006; Malhotra et al., 2008; Reitter et al., 2011), it has not yet been tested as a facilitator to L2 vocabulary learning.

In the present study, we examine the effectiveness of training and simulating L2 vocabulary learning through masked priming, an area of inquiry that has not been systematically tested. Our research questions are: 1) Does masked priming contribute to positive learning outcomes in L2 vocabulary acquisition? and 2) Does L2 proficiency level influence the effectiveness of masked priming?

Data collection is ongoing among three groups of English-Spanish learners. The participants are currently learning novel L2 words through masked priming once per week for 12 weeks. Control groups of similar sample sizes are learning the same target words but without exposure to masked priming. The design and materials reflect and allow for analyses on two variables that have been identified in prior work as impacting the strength of the priming effect: cognate status (cognates vs. non-cognates) and the duration of the interval between the prime and the target (50 vs. 150 ms).

Data from L2 vocabulary robustness measures collected at the beginning and end of the training will be analyzed in mixed effects models. Our hypotheses are that masked priming will pre-emptively activate L1 words and their meanings, and that these already-activated pathways will lead to more

efficient learning of corresponding L2 words. We argue that masked priming's ability to reduce processing costs that are associated with the mapping of L2 forms to their meanings implicates it as a potentially effective teaching and learning tool.

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