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What are cognates? And what good are they for bilinguals?

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Cognates

Words which
have a common
ancestor

Words which are similar in form and
meaning

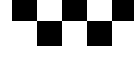
coffee kafei
time taimu
paediatrics pediatriki

glory gloria

castle castillo

modern modern

salary salaris



Pros of knowing cognates

The meaning of cognates may be guessed from context.



Knowing cognate words can facilitate comprehension.

However...

two cognates may be similar in some but not in other ways.

vessel vasija

welcome velkommen

history istoria

Even when cognates are very similar to each other, bilinguals may not recognise a foreign/second language word as a cognate of a word in their first language.

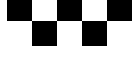


Academic vocabulary learning

Academic vocabulary is the vocabulary used in academic writing and speech across scientific disciplines.

theory analyse furthermore significant cumulative interference

In English many 'academic' words stem from Latin. So, if you speak a Romance language (e.g., Italian, French, Spanish, Romanian), you can learn many English academic words easily.



Recent research

Two studies examined the effect that cognateness (=whether a second-language word has a cognate or not in someone's first language), word length, and frequency have on second-language vocabulary learnability. One study suggested that cognateness does not play an important role while another study suggested that it is the main factor in vocabulary learnability.

Spanish and English have many cognate words.

The issue above hasn't been examined in relation to academic vocabulary learning.

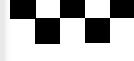
Raquel Perez-Urdaniz and I examined the effect of cognateness, word frequency and length on English academic word learnability among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners with Spanish as their first language.

Data collection and findings

51 Spanish L1 university students' knowledge of English cognates was measured via a Yes/No test containing words sampled from the most frequent 1,000 words in an academic word list, the Academic Vocabulary List.

Q: What is the effect of cognateness, word frequency and length on English academic word learnability among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners with Spanish as their first language?

A: Vocabulary frequency is by far the most important factor of academic word learnability. Cognateness and word length also affect how learnable an academic word is.



How to help bilingual children make the most of their knowledge of cognates

- Point out the link between a word they've recently encountered and its cognate
- Encourage children to break down words into their component parts
- Show children equivalent word parts in their two languages and talk about their meanings
 - -or -or (e.g., actor, actor)
 - -ista -ist (e.g., novelista, novelist)
 - -oso -ous (e.g., famoso, famous)

Summary

- Cognates can be your friend when learning words in another language or reading/listening to your second language.
- Some cognates are difficult to spot.
- Children (and adults!) can receive help with recognising second-language cognates through cognate awareness-raising activities.

