

Long, L. L., & Shaw, R. J. (2000). Adult age differences in vocabulary acquisition. *Educational Gerontology, 26*, 651-664.

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Summary: Both working memory (WM) and existing vocabulary knowledge are used when the meaning of a new word is deciphered in context. Age-related WM deficits and vocabulary strengths suggest that younger and older adults rely on these factors differently. Participants gave definitions for rare, novel words that appeared in short passages. Three measures of each individual difference factor (WM and vocabulary) were administered. Older adults gave more complete definitions for the novel words, had higher vocabulary knowledge test scores, but reduced WM scores compared to younger adults. As predicted, existing vocabulary knowledge contributed more to extracting word meaning from context than did WM for the older adults only.

Assumptions:

- Adults adapt successfully to the extent that they are able to acquire new skills and information.
- Most real-world vocabulary takes place in context.
- Older adults should easily learn new vocabulary because they generally exhibit better vocabulary knowledge than younger adults.
- Older adults have deficits in verbal learning.
- Older adults do not have strong WM (working memory) abilities.
- Older adults have abundant existing vocabulary knowledge due to a wealth of life experiences.

Results:

- Older adults did not perform as well on WM tasks as younger adults.
- Older adults outperformed younger adults on tasks measuring existing vocabulary knowledge.
- Not only can older adults effectively learn new material, they did so better than younger adults.
- Age differences were minimized when tasks had more ecological validity.
- Older adults had lower WM scores and higher vocabulary scores than young adults.
- Older adults were at a disadvantage when learning foreign vocabulary, especially when learning took place in the form of paired-associate type language drills.
- Tests of "practical intelligence" often showed reduced age differences.

Conclusions:

- The results of this study provided new information about older adults' ability to learn new words.
- Though deficits in older adults were noted, ecologically valid learning tasks demonstrated the ability of older adults to use accumulated experiences and knowledge to compensate when learning new vocabulary.

- The use of tasks more closely modeled on everyday cognition might provide additional information about the abilities of older adults to compensate for cognitive declines.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Provide students with meaningful activities to aid in vocabulary acquisition.
- Provide opportunities for students to read to enhance vocabulary achievement.
- Be prepared to offer tasks using accumulated experiences and knowledge to acquire new vocabulary and vocabulary skills.

Suggestions of Literacy Leaders:

- Provide educators with resources on learning techniques to enhance adult vocabulary.
- Help educators to recognize the role that life experience and knowledge plays in older adults' vocabulary acquisition.
- Aid educators in analyzing and reflecting on any biases or prejudices they might have concerning age and learning.

