2017-05-11

Expectations and Memory: Positive and Negative Expectations of Memorizing the Armenian Alphabet

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Studies suggest that expectations may have an effect on various cognitive functions, including memory. To this point, no studies have exclusively investigated the effect of expectations on short-term memory. This study tested the effect of positive and negative expectations on short-term memory, utilizing the Armenian alphabet as a test of memory. N=45 undergraduate students (23 men, 22 women), ranging in age from 18-26 years were divided equally into three groups: Group 1 was a control group, Group 2 was manipulated to have positive expectations before testing, and Group 3 was manipulated to have negative expectations before testing. All three groups were given three minutes to study 18 Armenian letters and their English-letter counterparts. Participants were then given two minutes to write the correct English letter next to each Armenian equivalent. A single-factor ANOVA compared averages between groups showed non-significant results (p = .15).

Methods

Participants:
45 undergraduate students (23 men, 22 women) aged from 18-26 years (M = 22.02 years, SD ± 0.27 years). One participant (2.2% of sample) was Hispanic/Latino, and the remaining 44 participants were Caucasian.

• The results were non-significant, failing to reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference in performance on an Armenian-alphabet task between the control group and groups who were experimentally-manipulated to have positive or negative expectations about their performance on the task.

Possible Confounds:
Most participants in the study were current college students or were college students at one time. College experience may provide increased opportunities to practice activities involving short-term memory. A sample of well-educated participants, practiced in literacy and learning, may moderate the actual effects (Martin & Senechal, 2012). Additionally, 21 of the participants (the students enrolled in the upper level psychology course) were aware that we were conducting a study that would manipulate a variable, and they may have detected that the passages they read prior to testing were written for the purpose of experimentally-manipulating positive or negative expectations. Finally, inter-rater reliability may be a confounding factor in our study. Of the three test administrators, Examiner 2 was the actual instructor of 21 of the participants. Similar to single-informant approaches, this may have led to participants striving to perform better than they normally would (Wentzel, Russell, & Baker, 2016).

Future Implications:
Although our data were not significant, results trended toward significance and the mean scores of each group were in line with our hypotheses. A future study should include a larger sample size to provide enough power to detect an effect.

The uniqueness of the measure is a strength of this study. To our knowledge, the Armenian language has never been utilized this way, thus, this study provides possibilities for implicating other foreign languages as measures of cognitive functioning, short-term memory, and expectations.

The trend results suggest a link between expectations regarding a task and the ability to recall information. These results could be useful for those learning a language, studying for school, or performing any task regarding memory.