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## **THE ROLE OF THE BRAIN'S REWARD SYSTEM IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING**

*In the context of contemporary educational research, increasing attention is being paid to the role of neurocognitive mechanisms in learning processes, particularly in foreign language acquisition and teaching. Among these mechanisms, the brain's reward system is considered a key factor influencing learners' motivation, emotional engagement, attention, and memory formation. Despite its recognized importance, the integration of reward-based neurocognitive processes into foreign language pedagogy remains insufficiently systematized and theoretically grounded. Therefore, the relevance of this study is defined by the growing need to incorporate findings from neuroscience into language teaching in order to enhance both the effectiveness of instruction and the level of learners' engagement.*

*The aim of this research is to explore the functioning of the brain's reward system and to determine its role in foreign language teaching and learning, with a particular focus on motivation, emotional involvement, and vocabulary acquisition. The study is based on an interdisciplinary approach that combines insights from neuroscience and second language acquisition theory.*

*The research provides the analysis of existing scientific literature and examines how reward-related mechanisms influence learning efficiency. Special attention is given to the interaction between emotional engagement and memory consolidation, as well as to the role of intrinsic motivation in sustaining long-term learning.*

*The findings indicate that activation of the brain's reward system enhances attention, strengthens neural connections, and facilitates long-term retention of linguistic material. Moreover, emotionally meaningful and engaging learning experiences contribute to deeper cognitive processing and more effective vocabulary acquisition.*

*The research methods include literature review, comparative analysis, and systematization. The results of the study provide a theoretical basis for further empirical research and offer practical implications for the development of motivating, emotionally supportive, and cognitively efficient foreign language teaching environments.*

**Key words:** *brain reward system, dopamine, foreign language learning, motivation, memory, emotions, neuroscience.*



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**Чихаріна К. І. Роль системи винагороди мозку у навчанні іноземних мов.**

У контексті сучасних освітніх досліджень зростає увага до ролі нейрокогнітивних механізмів у процесах навчання, зокрема у вивченні та викладанні іноземних мов. Серед цих механізмів система винагороди мозку розглядається як ключовий чинник, що впливає на мотивацію здобувачів освіти, їхню емоційну залученість, увагу та формування пам'яті. Незважаючи на визнану важливість цієї системи, інтеграція нейрокогнітивних процесів, пов'язаних із системою винагороди, у педагогіку іноземних мов залишається недостатньо систематизованою та теоретично обґрунтованою. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена зростаючою потребою впровадження досягнень нейронауки у практику викладання іноземних мов з метою підвищення ефективності навчання та рівня залученості здобувачів освіти.

Метою дослідження є вивчення функціонування системи винагороди мозку та визначення її ролі у процесі викладання і вивчення іноземних мов, з особливим акцентом на мотивації, емоційній залученості та засвоєнні лексики. Дослідження ґрунтується на міждисциплінарному підході, що поєднує положення нейронауки та теорії засвоєння другої мови.

У роботі здійснено аналіз наукової літератури та розглянуто вплив механізмів, пов'язаних із системою винагороди, на ефективність навчання. Особливу увагу приділено взаємодії емоційної залученості та процесів консолідації пам'яті, а також ролі внутрішньої мотивації у забезпеченні тривалого навчання.

Результати дослідження свідчать, що активація системи винагороди мозку сприяє підвищенню рівня уваги, зміцненню нейронних зв'язків і довготривалому збереженню мовного матеріалу. Крім того, емоційно значущий і залучаючий навчальний досвід забезпечує більш глибоке когнітивне опрацювання інформації та ефективне засвоєння лексики.

Методи дослідження включають аналіз наукової літератури, порівняльний аналіз та систематизацію. Отримані результати створюють теоретичне підґрунтя для подальших емпіричних досліджень і мають практичне значення для розроблення мотиваційно насичених, емоційно підтримувальних і когнітивно ефективних середовищ навчання іноземних мов.

**Ключові слова:** система винагороди мозку, дофамін, вивчення іноземних мов, мотивація, пам'ять, емоції, нейронаука.

**Introduction.** In recent decades, research in neuroscience has increasingly contributed to understanding the cognitive and emotional mechanisms involved in foreign language acquisition. Undoubtedly, language learning is not only a linguistic or cognitive activity, but it also involves complex motivational processes regulated by neural systems responsible for reward, reinforcement, and memory consolidation.



Researchers in neuroscience and educational psychology have emphasized the relationship between emotional processing and memory formation. C. Kelly explains that the brain constantly receives a large amount of sensory information and must determine which stimuli deserve attention. According to this author, the reticular activating system plays a key role in filtering incoming stimuli and prioritizing those that are novel, emotionally significant, or personally relevant. The scientist also notes that emotionally relevant stimuli activate the amygdala, which is closely linked to the release of dopamine. Dopamine functions as a neurotransmitter that supports motivation and activates the brain's reward mechanisms.

R. Wise further demonstrates that dopaminergic signaling plays a fundamental role in reinforcement processes, strengthening neural pathways associated with rewarding experiences. Similarly, C. Gallo argues that dopamine contributes to learning by enhancing neural connectivity and facilitating the consolidation of new information.

In addition to dopamine, other neurotransmitters also influence emotional processing and cognitive functioning. The Concise Medical Dictionary identifies serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins as neurochemicals associated with emotional well-being. Serotonin regulates mood and cognitive processes, oxytocin supports social bonding, and endorphins are associated with feelings of pleasure and stress reduction. These neurochemical mechanisms indirectly support learning by influencing emotional states.

Several researchers have also explored the connection between emotional intensity and memory recall. R. Todd demonstrates that emotionally meaningful experiences tend to be remembered more clearly and accurately than neutral events.

The role of emotions in foreign language learning has been widely discussed in applied linguistics research. Early studies primarily focused on the negative emotional aspects of language learning. Horwitz and Young, for example, examined foreign language anxiety, identifying it as one of the key affective factors influencing language acquisition.

Within the field of second language acquisition, J. M. Dewaele and J. Arnold investigated how emotions influence learners' engagement and attitudes toward language learning. Their research indicates that emotional experiences play an important role in shaping learners' motivation and participation in classroom activities.

Further research has introduced the concept of foreign language enjoyment, which refers to the positive emotional experience associated with successfully using and understanding a foreign language. J. M. Dewaele and P. D. MacIntyre define this



concept as a complex emotional state that arises when learners overcome linguistic challenges and experience progress in their language abilities. Research also suggests that positive emotional states can influence cognitive processing during language learning.

**Aim and tasks.** The aim of this study is to analyze the role of the brain's reward system in foreign language learning, and to determine how reward-related neurocognitive mechanisms influence the process of learning a foreign language. Additionally, the study seeks to identify pedagogical implications of reward-based neural processes for the design of more effective and emotionally engaging language learning environments.

To achieve the stated aim, the following research tasks are formulated:

- To examine the neurobiological foundations of the brain's reward system, including its key structures and the role of dopamine in reinforcement learning.
- To analyze the relationship between emotional engagement and language learning
- To identify and systematize pedagogical strategies (gamification, meaningful input, positive reinforcement) that activate the brain's reward system in language learning contexts.

**Research methods.** To achieve the aim of the study, the following methods were applied:

1. Theoretical analysis : a systematic analysis of scientific literature was conducted to examine existing research on the neurobiological mechanisms of the brain reward system, the role of dopamine in motivation and learning, and the relationship between emotion and language acquisition.

2. Synthesis and systematization: the collected theoretical data were synthesized and systematized in order to: establish connections between neuroscientific findings and language learning processes, identify common patterns in the role of emotional and reward-based mechanisms in learning.

3. Comparative analysis: A comparative approach was applied to analyze: different theoretical perspectives on motivation and reward, the role of emotions in language learning, various pedagogical approaches aimed at enhancing learner engagement.

**Research results.** The reward system of the brain, particularly structures such as the ventral striatum and dopaminergic pathways, is traditionally associated with responses to pleasurable stimuli such as food, music, or social interaction. However, emerging evidence suggests that similar neural mechanisms are activated during



successful learning experiences. When learners acquire new vocabulary, comprehend previously unfamiliar structures, or successfully communicate in a foreign language, these achievements can activate the reward circuitry of the brain. The release of dopamine associated with such moments of success acts as an intrinsic motivational signal that reinforces learning behaviors and encourages further engagement with the language.

At the core of this network lies the mesolimbic dopamine pathway, a neural circuit connecting midbrain structures with limbic and cortical regions. Two key structures within this pathway are the ventral tegmental area (VTA) and the nucleus accumbens, which play central roles in processing reward-related signals. The VTA contains dopaminergic neurons that project to multiple brain regions, including the nucleus accumbens, the prefrontal cortex, and parts of the limbic system. These connections form a functional network responsible for evaluating rewarding stimuli and guiding goal-directed behavior (Lewis, Florio, Punzo, & Borrelli, 2021).

The nucleus accumbens, located within the ventral striatum, acts as a critical hub where motivational and emotional signals converge. When dopaminergic neurons from the VTA release dopamine into the nucleus accumbens, the brain interprets the event as rewarding or motivationally significant. This signal influences decision-making processes and increases the likelihood that the associated behavior will be repeated in the future. In addition to these subcortical structures, the prefrontal cortex plays a regulatory role in the reward system. It is responsible for higher-order cognitive functions such as planning, impulse control, and evaluating long-term consequences. Through its connections with the mesolimbic system, the prefrontal cortex modulates reward-related behavior and integrates motivational signals with complex cognitive processes (Madua, 2022).

Understanding the relationship between reward mechanisms and language learning has important implications for both learners and educators. By aligning teaching practices with the natural functioning of the brain's motivational systems, educators may enhance student engagement, persistence, and overall learning outcomes (Thorburn, Lau, & Feldman, 2025).

The effectiveness of the reward system in learning is closely related to its interaction with neural structures responsible for memory and emotional processing. The dopaminergic reward pathways are strongly connected with the hippocampus, a region essential for memory formation, as well as with areas involved in emotional regulation (Kralova, Kamenicka, & Tirpakova, 2022).



When reward signals accompany the acquisition of new linguistic information, the brain tends to encode this information more effectively. Positive emotional states associated with successful learning strengthen neural pathways that support memory consolidation. Consequently, vocabulary items, grammatical structures, or communicative patterns learned in rewarding contexts are more likely to be retained over time. This interaction explains why meaningful or emotionally engaging learning experiences often lead to deeper language acquisition. Activities that evoke curiosity, interest, or personal relevance stimulate emotional engagement, which in turn enhances the reward response and strengthens memory formation (Kamenicka, 2022).

Motivation plays a central role in the success of foreign language learners. While extrinsic motivators such as grades, certificates, or career opportunities may initiate the learning process, long-term engagement often depends on intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation emerges when learners experience personal satisfaction from the learning activity itself. In language learning, this may occur when learners understand authentic content, successfully participate in conversation, or notice measurable progress in their abilities. These experiences activate the reward system, creating a feedback loop in which positive outcomes reinforce further effort. Over time, repeated activation of the reward system may strengthen learners' persistence and willingness to overcome challenges associated with language acquisition. Difficult tasks become more manageable when learners anticipate the satisfaction associated with eventual success (Bains, Barber, Nell, Ripollés, & Krishnan, 2024).

The reward system responds to various types of stimuli that can be broadly categorized as natural rewards and artificial rewards. Natural rewards are stimuli that have evolutionary significance and contribute directly to survival or social functioning. These include food intake, social interaction, reproduction, and other biologically meaningful experiences. When individuals engage in behaviors associated with these rewards, the brain activates the mesolimbic dopamine pathway, reinforcing the behavior. Artificial rewards, in contrast, involve stimuli that strongly activate the reward system but do not necessarily contribute to survival. These may include gaming activities, or certain forms of digital stimulation. Such stimuli can produce unusually intense dopaminergic responses, sometimes exceeding those generated by natural rewards (Tran, 2023).

Dopamine is the primary neurotransmitter involved in reward processing. However, its function extends beyond the simple generation of pleasure. Contemporary neuroscience distinguishes several components of reward-related processing that are mediated by dopaminergic activity. One component is "wanting," which refers to



motivational drive or the desire to obtain a particular stimulus or outcome. Dopamine plays a crucial role in generating this motivational state by signaling the potential value of a reward and energizing goal-directed behavior. Another component is “liking,” which represents the subjective experience of pleasure or satisfaction when the reward is obtained. While dopamine contributes to this process, other neurotransmitter systems also participate in generating the hedonic experience. A third component involves learning and reinforcement. Dopamine neurons respond strongly to unexpected rewards or to cues predicting a reward. This response creates a learning signal that allows the brain to associate specific stimuli, actions, or contexts with positive outcomes. Through repeated exposure, these associations become encoded in neural circuits, shaping future behavior. This reinforcement mechanism is essential for adaptive learning. When a behavior leads to a rewarding outcome, dopaminergic signaling strengthens synaptic connections between the neurons involved in that behavior. As a result, the brain becomes more efficient at reproducing the same behavior under similar circumstances.

Learning at the neural level is fundamentally a process of synaptic modification. Neurons communicate through specialized connections called synapses, and the strength of these connections can change depending on experience. This phenomenon, known as synaptic plasticity, forms the biological basis of learning and memory.

Dopamine plays a critical role in modulating synaptic plasticity. When dopaminergic signals accompany a particular experience, they enhance the strengthening of synaptic connections involved in that experience. This process increases the efficiency of neural pathways associated with rewarded behaviors. From a cognitive perspective, this mechanism enables the brain to identify patterns that lead to beneficial outcomes. For example, when a behavior results in a positive consequence, dopaminergic signaling reinforces the neural representation of that behavior. Over time, the behavior becomes easier to perform and may eventually become habitual. This process is essential not only for survival-related behaviors but also for complex forms of learning, including skill acquisition, problem-solving, and language learning.

Regular engagement with a foreign language also contributes to broader cognitive development through mechanisms of neural plasticity. Neural plasticity refers to the brain’s ability to reorganize and strengthen connections between neurons in response to repeated experiences. Frequent exposure to linguistic input and active language use stimulate neural networks involved in memory, attention, and executive functioning. As these networks become more efficient, learners may experience



improvements not only in language skills, but also in general cognitive abilities. Some studies suggest that sustained language learning may even lead to structural changes in the brain, including increased gray matter density in regions associated with language processing and cognitive control. The activation of the reward system supports this process by encouraging repeated engagement with language tasks. Each rewarding learning experience reinforces the neural pathways involved in language processing, gradually strengthening them over time.

Understanding the neurocognitive mechanisms underlying reward in learning provides valuable guidance for language educators. Teaching approaches that align with the functioning of the brain's reward system can enhance student motivation and engagement. One important implication concerns the use of gamified learning environments. Game-based elements such as points, levels, challenges, and immediate feedback create frequent opportunities for learners to experience small successes. These micro-achievements activate the reward system and maintain learners' interest over extended periods of study.

Another important factor is consistency of exposure. Regular interaction with the language allows the reward system to be activated repeatedly, reinforcing learning behaviors. Short but frequent learning sessions may therefore be more effective than occasional intensive study periods.

Finally, meaningful and personally relevant learning materials play a crucial role in stimulating reward responses. When learners engage with topics that resonate with their interests, experiences, or cultural curiosity, emotional engagement increases. This heightened engagement strengthens both motivation and memory retention.

**Discussion.** The findings of this study confirm that the brain's reward system plays a fundamental role in foreign language learning by integrating motivational, emotional, and cognitive processes. The analysis of neuroscientific and pedagogical research demonstrates that dopaminergic mechanisms are not only associated with pleasure but also function as a key driver of learning through reinforcement and neural plasticity.

One of the central insights emerging from this study is that successful language-related experiences can activate the mesolimbic reward system, leading to dopamine release. This process strengthens neural pathways associated with the learned material, thereby facilitating long-term retention. These findings are consistent with previous research (Wise, 2004; Gallo, 2014), which highlights the role of dopamine in reinforcement learning and synaptic strengthening.



The results also support the argument that emotional engagement significantly enhances learning efficiency. As indicated in the literature (Todd, 2014; Medina, 2008), emotionally meaningful stimuli are more likely to be encoded and retained. In the context of foreign language learning, this suggests that emotionally enriched input, such as personally relevant topics, engaging tasks, or meaningful communication, can improve both attention and memory processes.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation in sustaining long-term language learning. Unlike extrinsic motivators, intrinsic motivation is closely linked to internal reward mechanisms. When learners experience satisfaction from progress or successful communication, the reward system reinforces continued engagement. This finding aligns with contemporary research in positive psychology and second language acquisition (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016), which emphasizes the role of enjoyment and positive emotional experiences in learning.

An important pedagogical implication of these findings is the effectiveness of reward-based instructional strategies. Approaches such as gamification, immediate feedback, goal-setting create frequent opportunities for reward system activation.

At the same time, the study acknowledges certain limitations within the existing research. While many studies confirm the relationship between emotion, reward, and learning, there is a lack of longitudinal empirical research directly examining the impact of reward-based mechanisms on specific language outcomes.

**Conclusion.** This study has demonstrated that the brain's reward system constitutes a crucial neurobiological foundation for foreign language learning. Through the activation of dopaminergic pathways, particularly within the mesolimbic system, successful learning experiences generate motivational signals that reinforce engagement and facilitate memory formation. The interaction between reward mechanisms, emotional processing, and cognitive functions enables more effective encoding and retention of linguistic information. Positive emotional experiences, supported by dopamine release, enhance attention, strengthen neural connections, and contribute to the development of long-term memory.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of designing learning environments that actively engage the reward system. Strategies such as meaningful input, positive reinforcement, gamification, and regular practice can significantly improve learner motivation and learning outcomes. These approaches align with the natural functioning of the brain and therefore increase the effectiveness of language instruction.



At the same time, the study identifies a gap in empirical research concerning the long-term effects of reward-based learning in foreign language education. Future studies should focus on experimental and longitudinal designs to investigate how specific instructional strategies influence reward system activation and language acquisition over time.

Considering all the mentioned points into consideration, integrating insights from neuroscience into foreign language pedagogy offers promising opportunities for enhancing both the effectiveness and the sustainability of language learning. Understanding how the brain's reward system operates allows educators to create more engaging, motivating, and cognitively efficient learning environments.

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