



PRIMACY AND RECENCY EFFECTS ON RECALL: EXPERIMENT

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Abstract

Serial-position effect is the tendency of a person to recall the first and last items in a series best, and the middle items worst. The term was coined by Hermann Ebbinghaus through studies he performed on himself, and refers to the finding that recall accuracy varies as a function of an item's position within a study list. When asked to recall a list of items in any order (free recall), people tend to begin recall with the end of the list, recalling those items best (the **recency effect**). Among earlier list items, the first few items are recalled more frequently than the middle items (the **primacy effect**). The purpose of this study was to verify effect of serial position effects of memory. This study was conducted as an experimental method, and 20 adults without cognitive impairment were participated in the study. The memory task used word list of 40 items. The analysis was performed by dividing the word items into three conditions: primacy, middle, and recency. Primacy used the first 10 items in the word list, Middle used the 11th item to 30th in the middle of the word list, and finally Recency used the last 10 items in the word list for analysis. The result was $F = 6.79$ and showed that there was a statistically significant difference in memory retention of primacy, middle, and recency.

Key words: Primacy effect, Recency effect and Recall

1.0 INTRODUCTION

One of the most commonly used procedures to study memory is the free recall procedure. In a typical free recall task, the experimenter presents a list of words at a rate of one word for every 3 seconds. The subjects is to recall items in any order. The results show that the level of recall was highest for the words that had been presented at the beginning and end of the list (Glanger and Cumitz, 1966). This outcome is called the serial position effect

because the retention of an item depended upon the position effect in which it had been presented. Serial learning is one of the methods of verbal learning. Memorization through serial method was first experimented by Ebbinghaus (1902). Better recall of the words at the beginning of the list contributes to the serial position effect and is known as the Primacy effect. Items encountered/exposed first are remembered relatively well. The better recall of the words at the end of the list is known as the Recency effect.

Primacy effect:

The primacy effect, in psychology and sociology, is a cognitive bias that results in a subject recalling primary information presented better than information presented later on. Many investigations believe that the primacy effect reflects the output of the long term store, whereas the recency effect reflects the output of the short term store. The subjects rehearse the initial items frequently thereby transferring the items to the long term store and this long term store accounts for the primacy effect. The primacy effect is reduced when items are presented quickly and is enhanced when presented slowly (factors that reduce and enhance processing of each item and thus permanent storage). Longer presentation lists have been found to reduce the primacy effect. In 2013, a study showed that primacy effect is also prominent in decision making based on experience in a repeated-choice paradigm, a learning process also known as operant conditioning. The authors showed that importance attached to the value of the first reward on subsequent behaviour, a phenomenon they denoted as outcome primacy.

Recency effect:

The subjects retain the last few words in the short term store. This accounts for recency effect. The recency effect is reduced when an interfering task is given. Intervening tasks involve working memory, as the distractor activity, if exceeding 15 to 30 seconds in duration, can cancel out the recency effect. Additionally, if recall comes immediately after the test, the recency effect is consistent regardless of the length of the studied list, or presentation rate. The items in the middle of the list are recalled poorly for at least two reasons. First, they are so far from the end of the list that they are not in the short term store at the beginning of the retention test. Second, the subjects did not rehearse them extensively because only a few items can be rehearsed at a time.

There are also factors that can impact the strength and likelihood of the recency effect occurring. Factors that can influence the occurrence of the recency effect include:

- **Task Factors:** This refers to the task itself as well as how the information is processed. The length of the information presented and how it is presented can influence the recency effect. If you were presented a very short list of words, for instance, you might find it easy to recall all the items, essentially eliminating the recency effect. A very long list of terms, on the other hand, would be much more likely to produce recency effects.
- **Processing:** How you attend to and process the information as it is presented can also affect how it is recalled.

- **Time:** If a long period of time lapses between the presentation and rehearsal of the information and recall, the recency effect is dramatically reduced or even eliminated altogether.
- **Intervening Tasks:** Interference can occur if another task or information is presented after the first task. Research has found that if the distracting task takes longer than 15 to 30 seconds, it will eliminate recency effects when trying to recall the original information.

Impact on Learning

As you might imagine, the recency effect can play an important role in the learning process. When you are learning new information, you are most likely to remember the things that you study first (the primacy effect) as well as those things you study last (the recency effect). This means that when tested on the material, you are more likely to forget the things that were learned in the middle.

However, there are things that you can do to adapt your study sessions to take advantage of these memory phenomena. As you structure your study time, realize that the period at the beginning and the period at the end are your prime learning times.

Try the following steps:

1. Focus on the most important information at the beginning to take advantage of the primacy effect. This might involve reviewing important terminology or learning new information.
2. Use the middle of your learning time to read through old material you have already learned. This period is essentially downtime, but it can be useful for reviewing.
3. Spend the last part of your study session reviewing what you have already learned. This can involve rehearsing those important terms or going over your newly learned material.

Doing this will help cement newly learned information into your memory and minimize the chances of forgetting the things you learned in the middle of your study session.

Teachers can also take advantage of the recency effect in how they structure classroom time. The first part of the class should focus on important information. This means skipping over things like basic administrative tasks such as taking attendance and meet-and-greet icebreakers.

The middle section of class might involve a brief break where these formalities might be better attended to. Finally, those last 10 to 20 minutes of the class should focus on circling back to the most important concepts.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chung Won Lee^{1,*}, JinHoKim¹, and In KeukHwang (2019) were conducted a study on “A Study on the Serial Position Effect of Memory according to Illumination of LED Light” to verify the forms of the effect of serial position effects of memory according to the illuminance of light. Results of this study showed that the difference between primacy and middle items was statistically significant in relatively dim conditions. These results show that the primacy effect is strong in the dim condition, and the retrieval is low in the middle item. The recency effect was also good in the dim condition, but it was low in the relatively bright condition.

DevanshiDesai (2016) was conducted a study on “The significance of mode of presentation on the serial position effect: an exploratory study”. This experiment aimed to look at the significance of mode of presentation (auditory, visual printed and visual pictures) on serial position effects. Participants in this experiment were tested with different treatment conditions. With the auditory group, participants were asked to recall the words by writing them down after the experimenter read out the list of 21 common-concrete nouns at the rate of 1 second per word. With the visual printed and visual pictures group, the participants were asked to recall the words by writing them down after the experimenter presented the stimuli on a PowerPoint presentation. The results indicated that there was a significant main effect of serial position. However, a significant main effect of mode of presentation and the interaction between the mode of presentation and serial position wasn't found.

3.0 METHOD

3.1 PROBLEM

To determine the effect of primacy and recency on recall.

3.2 OBJECTIVE

To know the effect of the serial position on memory.

3.3 HYPOTHESES

Primacy and/or Recency effect on recall will be demonstrated.

3.4 VARIABLES

Independent Variable

Serial position (the order of presentation of a list of 40 words)

Dependent Variable

The number of primacy and recency words recalled.

3.5 PARTICIPANTS

This experiment was performed in adults 20 people with no cognitive impairment. The participants were 7 males and 13 females, and the mean age was 24.2 years. In addition, prior to the experiment, participants were fully informed about the experiment.

3.6 MATERIAL REQUIRED

- A list of 40 words divided into 3 categories: the first 10 corresponding to the primacy effect, the middle 20 words and the last 10 corresponding to recency effect.
- (Wooden screen-used in the lab method)

3.7 PROCEDURE

A list of 40 words was prepared using MS Power point. The participant is seated comfortably in front of the computer screen. The instructions on the screen are read out clearly and after checking if they understood the slides were presented.

3.8 PRECAUTIONS

1. Care was taken to ensure the list was not exposed to the subject prior to the experiment.
2. The subject should be able to view only one word at a time.

4.0. RESULTS:

The analysis was performed by dividing the word items into three conditions: primacy, middle, and recency. Primacy used the first 10 items in the word list, Middle used the 11th item to 30th item in the middle of the word list, and finally Recency used the last 10 items in the word list for analysis. Recalled words of all candidates were tabulated under these three conditions and done descriptive statistics like mean and standard deviation and inferential statistics i.e. One way ANOVA.

Table I: Participants data for number of words and percentage of recall for primacy, recency and also for middle words.

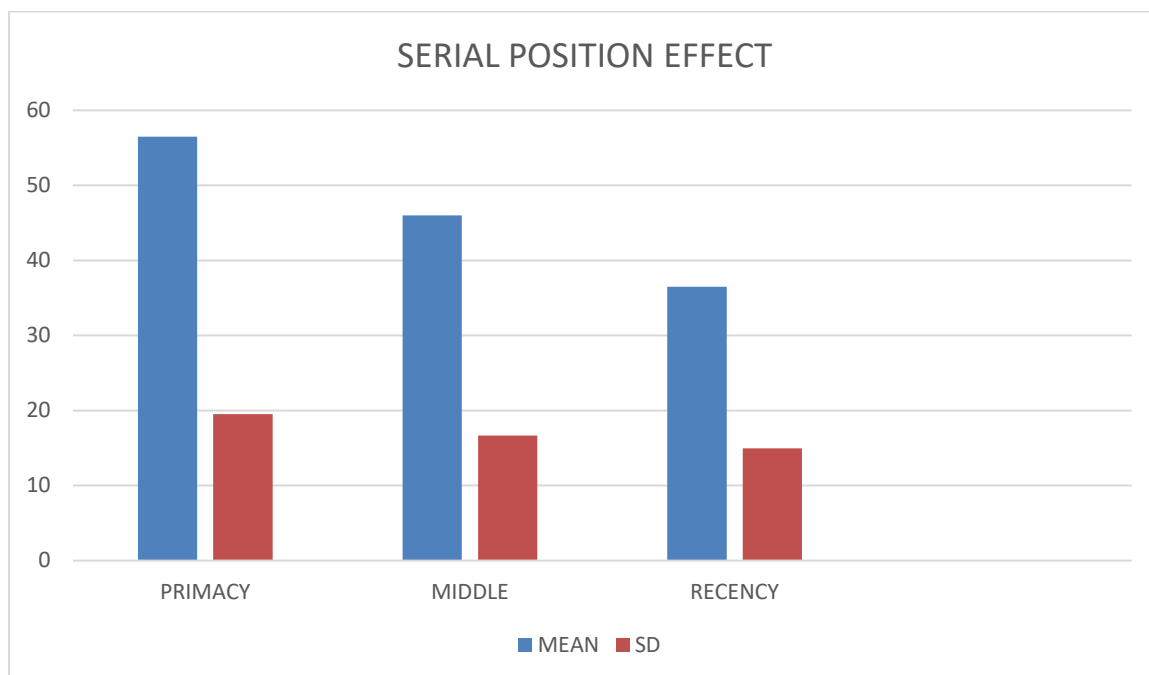
| Recall | Primacy Words recalled (1st 10 words) | Middle Words recalled (Middle 20 words) | Recency words recalled (Last 10 words) |
|---|--|---|---|
| Number of Words recalled by all participants | 113 | 184 | 73 |
| Percentage of Recall (%) | 56% | 46% | 36% |

Table II: Showing the Mean, Standard deviation and 'f' value of recall for primacy, recency effects and also for middle words.

| Recall | Primacy Words recalled (1st 10 words) | Middle Words recalled (Middle 20 words) | Recency words recalled (Last 10 words) | F ratio |
|---------------|--|---|---|----------------|
| Mean | 56.5 | 46 | 36.5 | 6.79 |
| S.D | 19.54 | 16.67 | 14.96 | |

Graph – 1

Bar diagram showing the Mean, Standard deviation of recall for primacy, recency effects and also for middle words.



4.1 DISCUSSION

Table -I shows that the percentage recall for first 10 words (primacy) is 56%, for last 10 words is 36%. Thus it shows that primacy effect has been noted. The percentage of recall for middle 20 words is 46%. Thus it clearly shows that though there is a primacy effect at the individual level, there is a comparatively less recency effect. And the Table -II shows that the Mean scores of the primacy, middle and recency words are 56.5, 46 and 36.5 respectively and Standard Deviation scores of the primacy, middle and recency words are 19.54, 16.67 and 14.96 respectively. And result of ANOVA was $F = 6.79$, and showed that there was a statistically significant difference in memory retention of primacy, middle, and recency.

CONCLUSION

At the individual level, there was remarkable primacy effects but not the recency effect and there was no significant difference in memory retention of primacy, middle, and recency.

Implications:

This phenomenon of primacy and recency helps us in acquiring learning strategies and in enhancing our memory.

References:

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