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Authors

Helo, Andrea
Guerra, Ernesto

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Visual Context and Word Learning in School-Age Children: An Eye-tracking Study

Andrea Helo

Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile

Ernesto Guerra

Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile

Abstract

Children are able to associate a word with its referent even after a single exposure (i.e., fast-mapping). This ability plays a central role in vocabulary development. Often, words are learned in context and not in isolation. However, most word learning studies have not considered visual contexts cues. In the present eye-tracking study we investigated the effects of contextual information (constant versus variable context) on word-referent association (exposure phase) and learning (test phase) during fast-mapping in school-age children. Also, we examined how vocabulary and attention skills modulate this process. Our results show that constant visual context facilitated novel word-reference association (exposure phase) in both age groups while word learning (test phase) was modulated by the visual context only in the younger group. Similarly, visual attention skills ease word learning in the most demanding condition (variable condition) in this group only. Finally, vocabulary skills predicted word learning in the older group.