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Context variability in learning

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Abstract

There are conflicting accounts of how context variability affects childrens word learning. In some instances, toddlers and preschoolers word learning appears sensitive to context changes (e.g., Goldenberg & Sandhofer, 2013; Vlach & Sandhofer, 2011). In other cases, however, children show learning independent of context variability (e.g., Akhtar, 2005). There may also be instances where context variability promotes label retention (Twomey, Ma, & Westermann, 2017). Inconsistent findings in this literature could be the result of task demands. Context dependencies may emerge when tasks are more difficult, because children are unable to suppress irrelevant context features and focus on relevant inputs, which are factors that can contribute to the strength of context effects (Smith & Vela, 2001). We explored potential context effects in word and fact learning using a design intended to reduce task load. Under these conditions, fact learning was affected by context variability, but word learning was not.