

Preschoolers' responses to unknown words: Questions and evaluation of definition quality

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Abstract

Asking questions about unknown things involves recognizing knowledge gaps, identifying information sources, and formulating appropriate questions. This active involvement propels development by individualizing the learning environment. To characterize active engagement in word learning, we investigated whether preschoolers ask questions about novel vocabulary and evaluate definition quality. In Study 1, preschoolers were asked to perform actions following instructions with novel (transpose) or familiar (switch) verbs. They asked more questions about novel ($M = 3.31$ out of 9, $SD = 3.34$) than familiar verbs ($M = .17$, $SD = .44$), $t(35) = -5.68$, $p < .001$. In Study 2, informative or uninformative definitions were provided. Preliminary data suggest that preschoolers only asked questions when faced with uninformative definitions ($M = .65$ out of 3). When faced with novel words, preschoolers not only elicit questions, but also determine whether their information needs have been met.