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Listening while reading promotes word learning from stories

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ABSTRACT

Reading and listening to stories fosters vocabulary development. Studies of single word learning suggest that new words are more likely to be learned when both their oral and written forms are provided, compared with when only one form is given. This study explored children's learning of phonological, orthographic, and semantic information about words encountered in a story context. A total of 71 children (8- and 9-year-olds) were exposed to a story containing novel words in one of three conditions: (a) listening, (b) reading, or (c) simultaneous listening and reading ("combined" condition). Half of the novel words were presented with a definition, and half were presented without a definition. Both phonological and orthographic learning were assessed through recognition tasks. Semantic learning was measured using three tasks assessing recognition of each word's category, subcategory, and definition. Phonological learning was observed in all conditions, showing that phonological recoding supported the acquisition of phonological forms when children were not exposed to phonology (the reading condition). In contrast, children showed orthographic learning of the novel words only when they were exposed to orthographic forms, indicating that exposure to phonological forms alone did not prompt the establishment of orthographic representations. Semantic learning was greater in the combined condition than in the listening and reading conditions. The presence of the definition was associated with better performance on the semantic subcategory and definition posttests but not on the phonological,

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orthographic, or category posttests. Findings are discussed in relation to the lexical quality hypothesis and the availability of attentional resources.

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Introduction

Vocabulary development starts during infancy and is a lifelong endeavor; children and adults acquire new words, and specify existing lexical representations, throughout the lifespan (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987). The majority of words are not acquired through direct instruction but rather incidentally from conversations, television, and texts (Akhtar, 2004; Elley, 1989; Henderson, Devine, Weighall, & Gaskell, 2015; Houston-Price, Howe, & Lintern, 2014). The current study explored how children learn new words when they are exposed to them incidentally in stories. To our knowledge, this is the first investigation of whether children show greater word learning from listening to, reading, or both listening to and reading stories.

Many studies have shown that exposure to stories fosters vocabulary development in children (Henderson et al., 2015; Nagy et al., 1987; Ricketts, Bishop, Pimperton, & Nation, 2011; Wilkinson & Houston-Price, 2013; Williams & Horst, 2014). Suggate, Lenhard, Neudecker, and Schneider (2013) compared the word learning shown in three story presentation conditions: independent reading, listening to an adult reading the story, and listening to an adult telling the story in his own words. In the listening conditions children (8- to 10-year-olds) were exposed to the spoken forms (phonology) and meanings (semantics) of new words but not their written forms (orthography), whereas in the reading condition they encountered the words' written forms (orthography) and meanings. The children who listened to the stories were more likely to demonstrate knowledge of the new words' meanings than the children who read the stories, suggesting that oral presentation is more beneficial for vocabulary learning in school-aged children than written presentation. In contrast to this result, studies of adults learning English as a second language tend to show that participants acquire new words more easily if presented with material in written form rather than oral form (Brown, Waring, & Donkaewbua, 2008; Sydorenko, 2010). Similarly, studies exploring memory for word lists or verse show better performance for written material than for oral material in both adults and children (Hartman, 1961; Menne & Menne, 1972). Because the primary medium for vocabulary acquisition is oral language, it makes sense that oral presentation may be the preferred and easiest method for acquiring vocabulary early on, but as reading ability improves, children become better at learning from written texts.

There is reason to suppose that both listening to and reading a story at the same time will be maximally beneficial for word learning. Studies using e-book presentations show that presentation in both modalities is more beneficial for vocabulary acquisition than simply listening to the book read by an adult (Shamir, Korat, & Fellah, 2012). Other work has also found that access to orthographic forms promotes oral vocabulary learning, an effect referred to as "orthographic facilitation" (e.g., Hu, 2008; Ricketts, Bishop, & Nation, 2009; Ricketts, Dockrell, Patel, Charman, & Lindsay, 2015; Rosenthal & Ehri, 2008). In these studies, children were taught phonological forms and semantics either with or without orthography; greater learning of phonology, semantics, and orthography was seen for items where orthography was provided. To date, studies investigating orthographic facilitation all have employed a direct instruction approach to teaching new words. Whether these findings generalize to an incidental learning context, where children's attention is not explicitly drawn to the new words, needs to be explored.

Further evidence that simultaneously listening to and reading stories leads to better learning than a single modality of presentation comes from a study by Rosenthal and Ehri (2011). In that study, children read stories that contained novel words silently, pronouncing half of the new words aloud when they encountered them. Semantic and orthographic learning was greater for words that had been pronounced, demonstrating "phonological facilitation." Although in this study words were embedded in

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