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Learning about word learning strategies and knowing when to use them

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Purpose: Independent reading is an important source of word learning for school children. Acquiring knowledge of new words during reading involves at least two factors: 1) monitoring the familiarity of words; and 2) using strategies to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words. While the second factor has received a great deal of attention, the first factor has been somewhat overlooked. In the present study we developed a test of students' ability to monitor word familiarity and examined whether this factor contributed to word learning.

Method: 304 Danish fourth-graders participated in a teacher-delivered vocabulary intervention involving word-learning strategies. Transfer effects to word learning were assessed in a word learning task. Before training, the students' ability to monitor word familiarity during reading was tested. Moreover, the students completed measures of reading comprehension and general vocabulary.

Results: The students' ability to identify unfamiliar words was a significant predictor of word learning after controls for reading comprehension and general vocabulary.

Perspectives: The results support the integration of word knowledge monitoring in vocabulary interventions.