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Vocabulary growth through reading in adolescents with language learning disabilities: A case study

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Background. The amount of vocabulary development that takes place during the school-age years is impressive; children acquire about 3,000 words a year (Beck & McKeown, 1991). A primary means of vocabulary development during this period is through written exposure to words. Vocabulary acquisition through reading happens incrementally. Following an initial exposure, children acquire a form of partial word knowledge (Wagovich & Newhoff, 2004). Over time and with additional exposures to a word, a more complete understanding of the word develops. The purpose of this case study is to shed light on processes of partial word knowledge growth in a child with a language-learning disability. Method. The case study participant was a 13 year, 10 month old, African-American female, with a history of learning disability and reading difficulty. Language testing, administered as part of a larger study, confirmed that receptive and expressive language were areas of significant weakness, relative to nonverbal reasoning skills. To observe processes of partial word knowledge growth in this individual, the child received a vocabulary pretest, followed by three repeated readings of two stories, each containing eight nouns and eight verbs. Story reading sessions occurred two to three days apart, and each session concluded with posttesting, to assess four types of partial word knowledge growth. In a final session, occurring three days after the last reading session, testing was administered to assess retention of word knowledge. Results. Data will be graphed to indicate the participant's partial word knowledge growth, across the four types of word knowledge measured, and across each exposure to the words in the texts. Results will be discussed in light of previous work in this area and in light of the larger project from which this case study comes. Clinical and research implications of this work will be highlighted.