To repeat or not to repeat: Competitor repetition and variability in childrens memory for words

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Abstract

To successfully learn words, children must map words to referents in the presence of competitor objects, and retain these mappings across time. Past research suggests that competitor repetition supports word mapping. However, these studies have not implemented delayed tests. Relying on a desirable difficulties framework, we predicted that competitor variability would lead to better long-term retention of novel words. To test this prediction, children ages 2-6 completed a novel word learning task. Children were assigned to a competitor repetition or competitor variation condition. In Experiment 1, we tested retention of novel word-referent mappings at an immediate and 10-minute delayed test. In Experiment 2, we assessed whether retrieval dynamics during learning explained retention performance. Results revealed that competitor variation engendered less retrieval success during learning. Competitor variation also reduced forgetting of novel words across time. We highlight the importance of moving beyond immediate tests when characterizing competition in word learning.