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Acquisition of Expressive Vocabulary by Children in Storybook Reading

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&

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INTRODUCTION

Learning new vocabulary is significant in the acquisition of language. The process begins in infancy and proceeds rapidly throughout childhood. Thus, it is interesting to understand what helps young children achieve vocabulary growth. According to Senechal, LeFevre, Hudson & Lawson (1996), direct teaching cannot account for rapid growth in word learning by young children up to six years of age. However, Robbins & Erhi (1994) found that word learning can occur through direct and explicit referencing by adults as well as through incidental encounters like hearing words in conversations, on television and in stories. Thus, it is in the interest of this study to investigate the impact of story listening on children's ability to learn new expressive vocabulary. This study is an extension of the research by Senechal (1997). While Senechal's research included the acquisition of receptive and expressive vocabulary through single-reading, repeated-reading and questioning-reading conditions, this short study only assesses children's acquisition of expressive vocabulary through repeated-reading and questioning conditions.

METHOD

Subjects

Four Chinese children, aged three and four years old, participated in the experiment. There were one boy and one girl in each group, counterbalancing gender across reading conditions. Their ages were 4:6 (Subject 1, S1), 4:5 (Subject 2, S2), 3:6 (Subject 3, S3) and 3:5 (Subject 4, S4). The mean age of the four-year-olds was 4:6 whilst that for the three-year-olds was 3:6. S1 and S3 are females and S2 and S4 are males.

Story Book and Target Words

The story book, *The very hungry caterpillar* (Carle 1970), was selected because the story structure consisted of repetition of a similar episode: A caterpillar ate different food on different days before it became a butterfly. This repetitive structure allowed the introduction of targeted items at relatively similar levels in the story structure (Senechal & Cornell 1993).

In total, 17 words illustrated in the book were selected for the vocabulary test. This included seven words which were expected to be known and ten words expected to be unknown by the pre-kindergarten children. Of these, the ten targeted words were used for the analysis of this study. Hence, the learning task was to learn novel nouns and be able to label the target items correctly.

The 17 words were: pear, orange, caterpillar*, plum*, strawberry*, chocolate cake, ice cream, pickle*, cheese*, salami*, lollipop*, cherry pie, sausage*, cupcake*, watermelon, apple and cocoon* (target words are indicated with an asterisk). Each target word appeared only once per reading of the narrative.

Vocabulary Test

Learning was measured by testing expressive vocabulary. These tests have been shown to be sensitive measures of vocabulary and were used extensively in past research on learning from storybooks (Pemberton & Watkins 1997; Elley 1989; Cornell, Senechal & Broda 1988).

Book illustrations of the target items were scanned and placed on cards. These were used in the expressive vocabulary test where children were asked to label them. This use of picture card illustrations as retrieved cues for recall was used successfully by Cornell *et al.* (1988).

Design of Vocabulary Test

The present study includes two experimental conditions: repeated-reading and questioning. In the experiment, the storybook was read a total of three times. Questioning was not used in the first and second readings. However, children in the questioning conditions (third reading) were asked to label target items during the reading of the storybook.

The predictions for expressive vocabulary test were tested with two planned orthogonal comparisons. Performance in the repeated-reading

was compared to performance in the questioning condition to provide a test of the impact of active responding on learning.

Transcript

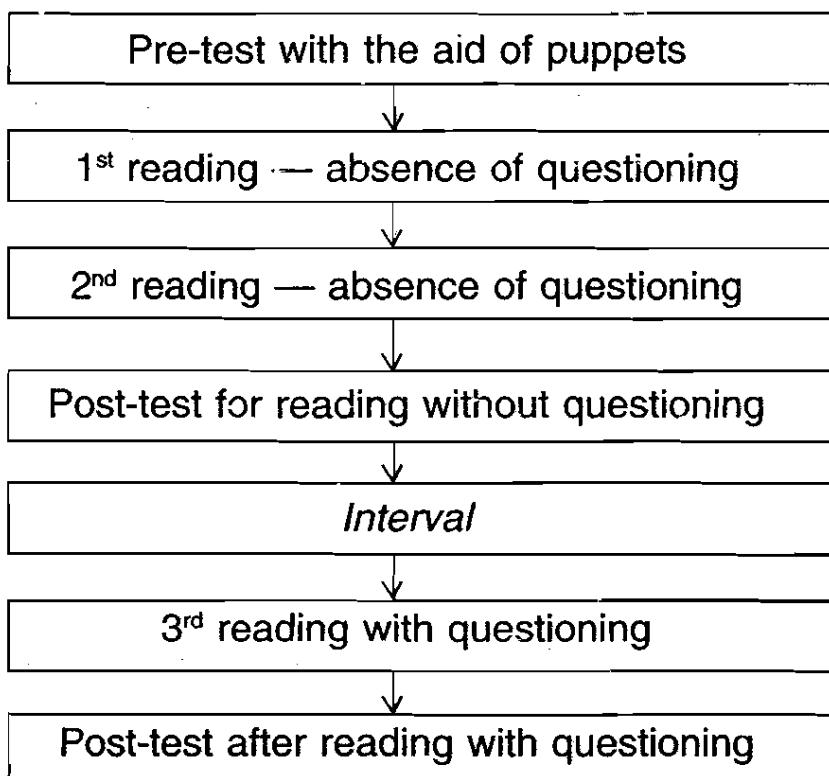
A transcript (see Appendix) of the recording with S3 consists of two columns, four texts and four speakers (including two imaginary speakers: Winnie the Pooh, and Pinky the Monkey). The experiment was conducted on the same day at a childcare centre in Singapore.

PROCEDURE

The activities of the experiment were conducted in the following order: The researchers pre-tested the children for their expressive vocabulary individually based on the list of 17 words. The children were then read the storybook twice and post-tested after the completion of the repeated-reading condition. During these readings, the researcher did not point to any illustrations in the storybook.

In the questioning condition, the researcher pointed, explained to and questioned the children on the illustrations in the storybook. The procedure for each subject lasted approximately 25 minutes. This procedure is illustrated in the figure below:

Fig. 1: Procedure of Experiment Conducted



FINDINGS

Children were asked to label pictures card illustrations representing the 17 words. The test scores taken for analysis were the ten further selected target words as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of children who correctly labelled the target items

Expressive Vocabulary Test			
Types of Test Words	Pretest	Post-test 1 (after repeated-reading condition)	Post-test 2 (after questioning condition)
Caterpillar	4	3	3
Plum	0	0	2
Strawberry	3	3	4
Pickle	0	0	0
Cheese	3	4	3
Salami	0	0	0
Lollipop	4	4	4
Sausage	3	4	3
Cupcake	1	3	2
Cocoon	0	2	1
Total*	18	23	22

Key: Total* - This total is computed based on the frequency of correct identification of the word by the total number of words (10 words x 4 children = 400 words for the sample).

Note: The maximum number of children was four.

Pre-test

Based on the results of the pre-test, three subjects managed only to identify 40% of the target words while one subject (S2) managed a test score of 50%. The four-year-olds showed a slight difference in their vocabulary while the three-year-olds showed no differences. However, the male subject for the older age group showed a higher test score as compared to the female subject in the same age group.

Post-test 1

After the repeated-reading condition was administered, there were varied performance, ranging from 100% to 0%, in the test scores of the subjects. In the four-year-old group, the male subject, S2 showed a 60%

increase while the female subject, S1 showed no improvement. This was reversed in the three-year-old group as the female subject, S3, had a 100% increase as compared to the 25% increase in the male subject's (S4) test score.

Post-test 2

After the questioning condition, the test scores of three subjects: S1, S2 and S4 did not show any improvement in their expressive vocabulary. However, S3 had a negative percentage of 38% in her test score for post-test 2.

From Table 1, the test scores revealed that two of the most difficult words to be learnt were *pickle* and *salami*. All of the subjects were not able to identify them throughout the three tests. In contrast, the word *lollipop* was the easiest as the subjects could correctly label it in the pre-test and maintain perfect test scores for both post-tests.

Some improvements were shown in the test scores for *plum* and *strawberry*. More subjects were able to identify them correctly in post-test 2. In the case of *plum*, none of the subjects was able to identify it correctly in the pre-test and post-test 1. However, two subjects were able to do so during post-test 2. On the other hand, the test scores for *strawberry* perfected in post-test 2 where previously three subjects could identify it.

For the other words such as *cheese*, *sausage*, *cupcake* and *cocoon*, the subjects showed better test scores during post-test 1 than in post-test 2. In fact, the subjects on the whole were able to identify slightly more target items correctly in the repeated-reading condition (post-test 1) than in the questioning condition (post-test 2). The total number of correctly identified words increased from 18 in the Pre-test to 23 in the post-test 1, but later decreased to 22 in post-test 2. Unlike the prediction made in Senechal's study where the children produced more words in the questioning condition than the repeated-reading condition, the result of this study showed a contrary situation.

A unique situation also arose for *caterpillar*, as all subjects were able to identify correctly the target item in the pre-test but one of the subjects (S1) failed to do so for post-test 1 and post-test 2. These data generally support the notion that both the repeated-reading and the questioning conditions are effective for expressive vocabulary acquisition.

DISCUSSION

The most interesting finding of this study is that the results obtained from questioning as compared to the repeated-reading condition in the storybook reading did not significantly differ in the children's vocabulary acquisition. Table 1 shows that the total number of words correctly identified by the four children had a negligible variance of 1. In fact, repeated-reading condition achieved a slightly better performance by obtaining a score of 23 while asking questions about the new vocabulary introduced in the book achieved a score of 22.

The results of the study do suggest that pre-kindergarten children are able to expand their expressive vocabulary when they listen to stories at least twice and hear unfamiliar words repeated in the stories. The total number of words correctly identified by the four subjects had an increase of approximately 28% from 18 words to 23 words after the repeated-reading condition. This finding supports and extends the findings of other research on vocabulary acquisition from stories (Elley 1989; Jenkins *et al.* 1984).

As discussed in our findings, the target words, *salami* and *pickle*, are the most difficult to learn. This could be due to the reason that these items are not commonly found in the Asian context as the children are not exposed to them. However, one of the subjects, S4 did label the *pickle* as *cucumber*, which bears a resemblance to a *pickle* (refer to Table 2).

As the experiment was conducted using the same procedure for all subjects, Table 2 shows a description of the subjects and a summary of their responses during the pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2.

As shown in the results of post-test 1 (tabulated in Table 3), the subjects have learnt the target words by quietly listening to the story provided by the researcher. It seems likely that vocabulary acquisition can occur in such exposures as the subjects attempt to comprehend meaning. The meaning of the new words is apparent with the accompanying illustrations. Three of the subjects were able to retain the newly acquired vocabulary as shown by the results obtained in post-test 2, with the exception of S3 who had a decrease of 38% in the later test score (Table 3). However, none of the subjects was able to improve their test scores with the administering of the questioning condition.

Table 2: Responses of the Subjects in the Study

Subject	1			2			3			4		
Birth Date	March 1995			April 1995			March 1996			April 1996		
Age	4:6			4:5			3:6			3:5		
Gender	Female			Male			Female			Male		
Ethnicity	Chinese			Chinese			Chinese			Chinese		
Targeted Words	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2
Pear	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Orange	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Caterpillar*	✓	Cat-pillar	Cat-pillar	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Plum*	Mango	Grapes	Prunes	Juice	✓	✓	Blue-berry	Blue-berry	Blue-berry	✗	Prune	✓
Strawberry*	Cherry	Jerry Cherry	Cherry Strawberry	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chocolate cake	Cake	Cake	✓	Cake	✓	✓	✗	Cupcake	Cupcake	Apple	✗	✗
Ice cream	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pickle*	✗	✗	Cake	Corn	Corn	Corn	✗	✓	Celery	Cucumber	Cucumber	Cucumber
Cheese*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Chocolate	✓	Ice cream	✓	✓	✓

As the experiment was conducted using the same procedure for all subjects, the above table shows a description of the subjects and a summary of their responses using the pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2.

Table 2: Responses of the Subjects in the Study (*continued*)

Subject	1			2			3			4		
Birth Date	March 1995			April 1995			March 1996			April 1996		
Age	4:6			4:5			3:6			3:5		
Gender	Female			Male			Female			Male		
Ethnicity	Chinese			Chinese			Chinese			Chinese		
Targeted Words	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2
Salami*	Sweet	Sweet	Sweet	Cheese	X	Roast	Blue-berry	X	X	X	Orange inside	X
Lollipop*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cherry pie	Cake	Pie	Cake	Cheese	Cheese	Cheese	Ice cream	Cupcake	Cupcake	Chocolate	Chocolate	Cherry
Sausage*	✓	✓	✓	✓	Sausages	✓	✓	✓	✓	Sweet	Sausage	X
Cupcake	Cake	✓	Cake	✓	✓	✓	Blue-berry	✓	✓	Dustbin	Don't know	X
Watermelon	Hat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Apple	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cocoon*	Corn	Coconut	Coconut	Corn	✓	✓	Snail	✓	Cup-coon	Chocolate	Caterpillar home	Caterpillar home

As the experiment was conducted using the same procedure for all subjects, the above table shows a description of the subjects and a summary of their response during the pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2.

Table 3: Number of words (and percentage) correct on the Expressive vocabulary tests after each reading condition

Expressive Vocabulary Test								
Types of Tests	Pretest		Post-test 1 (after repeated-reading condition)			Post-test 2 (after questioning condition)		
Subjects	A	B (%)	A	B (%)	C¹ (%)	A	B (%)	C² (%)
S1	4	40	4	40	0	4	40	0
S2	5	50	8	80	60	8	80	0
S3	4	40	8	80	100	5	50	-38
S4	4	40	5	50	25	5	50	0

Key:

A — Number of words correct

B — Number of words correct in percentage

C¹ — Percentage change in the number of words correct (Comparison made between Pre-test and Post-test 1)

C² — Percentage change in the number of words correct (Comparison made between Post-test 1 and Post-test 2)

Note: The maximum number of target words was ten.

Looking at the results shown in Table 3, there is no evidence that gender plays a significant role in the vocabulary acquisition by children of age three to four years. For the case of S2 who belongs to the four-year-old group, his prior vocabulary knowledge could be a variable significant enough to affect vocabulary growth from listening to stories. This male subject shows the case where children with larger vocabularies learn more words than those with smaller vocabularies. S2 had the highest score in the pre-test and eventually championed as he attained the highest score of eight out of ten. The other subjects on the other hand only managed a score of four to five. In the younger age group, the female subject, S3, achieved a better performance in post-test 1 but was unable to maintain her achievement in post-test 2. Thus, she was only able to achieve an equal performance as the male subject, S4, in her age group (Table 3).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that at this early age of the subjects, questioning during readings can be as effective as repeated reading in the children's acquisition of expression vocabulary. Unlike in Senechal's (1997) research, the results of answering questions during readings were

more helpful in the acquisition of expressive vocabulary. Thus, parents, caregivers and teachers of these age groups can use either condition in their shared reading with the children.

This study does have its own limitations as it consists of a small sample size and thus may not be a good representation. In addition, the questioning condition was conducted on the same day as the repeated-reading condition. Hence, there is a possibility that the earlier repeated-reading condition did influence the children's performance in the later post-test.

With the result of this study, however, more knowledge of how young children acquire new words is obtained. More importantly, it provides new insights into how children acquire expressive vocabulary. Researchers in the field of psycholinguistics who are interested in analysing and discussing the responses of the subjects will find the data (Table 2) collected in the present study useful.

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Irene Lee Choong Kum and Ashar Lim Chiang Siew are BA final-year students in the Division of English Language and Applied Linguistics, National Institute of Education.

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APPENDIX**Key:**

R1 — Researcher 1 E — Subject 3
 Ph — Winnie the Pooh Pky — Pinky, the monkey
 < > — Pause [...] — section of recording not transcribed

Extract of Transcript

Verbal	Action
<p><i>Pre-test</i></p> <p>R1: Ok E, I told you my name is R1 right? And do you know what is the name of my friend here?</p> <p>E: Pooh!</p> <p>R1: You know his name is Pooh.</p> <p>Ph: Hello ! E, < > do u know that I want to know your name?</p> <p>R1: Can you tell Pooh < > your name?</p> <p>E: E.</p> <p>R1: E, ok. Now Pooh need some help, ok? There are some pictures here and we need you to help teach Pooh what word s or what objects are these ok? So what do you have here?</p> <p>E: Pear Orange Caterpillar Bear < > blueberry I like to eat blueberry. Strawberry</p> <p>R1: Do you know what is that?</p> <p>E: No.</p> <p>R1: You don't know. Never mind.</p> <p>E: Ice cream</p> <p>R1: ok, yes, < > this one? It's a vegetable.</p> <p>E: Vegetable. In school, I eat my veggie.</p> <p>R1: You eat your veggie only in school. Do you eat your vegetables at home?</p> <p>E: Yes!</p> <p>R1: Ok good. What's this then?</p> <p>E: Chocolate</p> <p>R1: next card. Do you know what is this?</p> <p>E: Don't know.</p> <p>R1: what does it look like to you?</p>	<p>Researcher uses puppet to attract the attention of the subject</p> <p>Picture Card Shown: <i>Pear</i> <i>Orange</i> <i>Caterpillar</i> <i>Plum</i> <i>Strawberry</i> <i>Chocolate cake</i> <i>Ice cream</i> <i>Pickle</i> <i>Cheese</i> <i>Salami</i></p>

Verbal	Action
E: Blueberry pie Lollipop Another ice cream Sausage Blueberry again R1: You like blueberry?	<i>Salami</i> <i>Lollipop</i> <i>Cherry Pie</i> <i>Sausage</i> <i>Cupcake</i>
E: Yes! Watermelon Apple R1: And the last one? Do you know what this is? Snail	<i>Watermelon</i> <i>Apple</i> <i>Cocoon</i>
	Story book read for the first and second time using the repeated-reading condition where the researcher did not point to any illustrations in the storybook

Post-test 1

R1: Now, E, just now you saw in the book there was quite a number of things that we have in the cards here, right? Can you tell us what they are again and see if you have learned some new words?

E: Pear
Orange
Caterpillar
Blueberry
Strawberry
Cupcake
Ice Cream
Pickle
Cheese

R1: Can you remember this one?

E: Cannot

R1: Cannot, ok never mind.

E: Lollipop
Cupcake
Sausage
Cupcake
Watermelon
Apple
Cocoon

Picture Card Shown:

Pear
Orange
Caterpillar
Plum
Strawberry
Chocolate cake
Ice Cream
Pickle
Cheese

Salami

Lollipop
Cherry Pie
Sausage
Cupcake
Watermelon
Apple
Cocoon

Verbal	Action
<p>Questioning Condition Reading</p> <p>R1: Ok now E just now we went through the story right? Are we ready for another round?</p> <p>E: Yeah!</p> <p>R1: Yeah! Ok What do we have here?</p> <p>E: Caterpillar!</p> <p>R1: Caterpillar Yes and do you know the title of this story?</p> <p>E: Yes</p> <p>R1: What is it?</p> <p>E: Always Mrs. Phang read to me.</p> <p>R1: Who read to you?</p> <p>E: Mrs. Phang</p> <p>R1: So what is the title of the story</p> <p>E: Caterpillar.</p> <p>R1: The very hungry caterpillar</p> <p>E: caterpillar</p> <p>R1: Now let's take a look at the page here. In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a leaf. Ok you see there's a egg here on the leaf? With the moon shinning right?</p> <p>E: Yes!</p> <p>R1: Let Pooh Bear sit here and see the story and you also concentrate, Ok? Now, One Sunday morning the warm sun came up and - pop! - out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry</p> <p>E: Caterpillar</p> <p>R1: Yes! Caterpillar and this is the</p> <p>E: Sun!</p> <p>R1: Yes, the Sun and he started to look for some food. (<i>Hums a tune</i>) On Monday He ate through one apple, But he was still <> hungry.</p> <p>E: still hungry.</p> <p>R1: On Tuesday He ate through two</p> <p>E: pears</p> <p>R1: pears, and he was still hungry.</p> <p>E: hungry.</p> <p>Eat three</p> <p>R1: Eat three? What do you have here, on Wednesday?</p> <p>E: Three berries.</p> <p>R1: No, these are called plums.</p>	<p>The questioning condition was administered with the third reading. In this condition, the researcher pointed, explained and questioned the children about the illustrations in the storybook.</p>

Verbal	Action
<p>E: Plums</p> <p>R1: Plums.</p> <p>E: Plums.</p> <p>R: Yes, three plums ok? So On Wednesday He ate through three plums, But he was still <> hungry.</p> <p>E: hungry</p> <p>R1: On Thursday He ate through four</p> <p>E: strawberries</p> <p>R1: yes four strawberries, and he was still hungry.</p> <p>E: hungry.</p> <p>R1: On Friday He ate through</p> <p>E: oranges</p> <p>R1: How many oranges?</p> <p>E: one two three four five</p> <p>R1: five oranges, Ok. So now came Saturday. Ok Elycia On Saturday, the Caterpillar ate through one piece of</p> <p>E: blueberry</p> <p>R1: This is a chocolate cake</p> <p>E: Chocolate cake</p> <p>R1: Yes and a</p> <p>E: ice cream blueberry</p> <p>R1: an ice cream and a</p> <p>E: cup-pa-cake</p> <p>R1: This is called a pickle</p> <p>E: pickle</p> <p>R1: Yes a pickle and a slice of <> what is this</p> <p>E: cheese!</p> <p>R1: Yes, this is cheese and he also ate one slice of</p> <p>E: jam</p> <p>R1: This is called salami</p> <p>E: salami</p> <p>R1: Yes, OK.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>R1: Now what is this again? <> Sorry? It's called salami.</p> <p>E: salami</p> <p>R1: You must remember, ok?</p> <p>E: Mmm</p> <p>R1: Ok? And what do we have here?</p>	 <p>Subject was off-task for a moment and researcher attempted to bring her back onto the task.</p>

Verbal	Action
<p>E: Lollipop. R1: Hah? E: lollipop! R1: lollipop! And this E: Cup-cake R1: This is called a cherry pie. E: cherry pie R1: Yes and a sausage E: sausage</p> <p>R1: very good E: cupcake, watermelon R1: Yes very good and and at the end of it the cateroillar had a < > stomachache! E: ache. Like me, like me. R1: Like you, you mean when you eat too much you get a stomachache? E: Yes, every time I 'put-put' in my mommy's room, so stinko! R1: So stinko, hah? Ok! And after that it was Sunday again and the caterpillar ate through a < > nice green leaf and after that he felt much better E: Look one two three R1: one two three E: four five R1: four five Ok. now look at this OK, now E: Fat caterpillar R1: Yah, it}s a fat caterpillar and he wasn't hungry anymore, was he? E: No. R1: No. After eating so much food, right? So he built a small house. Ok, called cocoon. E: So Fat R1: Yah it's to put him inside the house. He stayed in the cocoon for more than two weeks ok and he nibbled a small hole through the cocoon and pushed his way out and he was a beautiful E: butterfly R1: Butterfly! Yeah!</p>	

Verbal	Action
<p>Post-test 2</p> <p>R1: Before I give you you this, can you tell Pinky the monkey ok.</p> <p>Pky: Hi, E.</p> <p>E: Can you tell Pinky the monkey what these are?</p> <p>R1: This is a [...] and you tell me what is on the cards ok? The first one</p> <p>E: Pear Orange hmmm caterpillar, fat caterpillar Blueberry Strawberry Cupcake Ice cream Celery</p> <p>R1: huh, what is that? Say it again, it's ok, just say.</p> <p>E: Cupcake</p> <p>R1: no, just now you didn't say that. You said something else. It's ok just tell me. Just tell me, what do you think what it is?</p> <p>E: looks like a [...]</p> <p>R1: looks like a</p> <p>E: cupcake.</p> <p>R1: Just now did you say Celery?</p> <p>E: yes. Celery.</p> <p>R1: yes, Celery, actually it's a pickle.</p> <p>E: Pickle.</p> <p>R1: This?</p> <p>E: ice cream</p> <p>R1: and this?</p> <p>E: cannot remember.</p> <p>R1: cannot remember.</p> <p>E: lollipop Cupcake Hmm, Sausage Cupcake Watermelon And apple</p> <p>R1: and one more last one?</p> <p>E: Cup-coon</p> <p>R1: say again.</p> <p>E: Cup-coon</p>	<p>Picture Card shown:</p> <p><i>Pear</i> <i>Orange</i> <i>Caterpillar</i> <i>Plum</i> <i>Strawberry</i> <i>Chocolate cake</i> <i>Ice cream</i> <i>Pickle</i></p> <p><i>Salami</i></p> <p><i>Lollipop</i> <i>Cherry Pie</i> <i>Sausage</i> <i>Cupcake</i> <i>Watermelon</i> <i>apple</i></p> <p><i>Cocoon</i></p> <p><i>Cocoon</i></p>