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Authors

Boers, Frank
Godfroid, Aline
Housen, Alex

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Learners Processing of Novel Words while Reading: Eye Movements and Learning Gains

Aline Godfroid

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Frank Boers

Erasmushogeschool Brussel Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Alex Housen

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Abstract: We present a study that gauges advanced foreign language learners processing and (partial) acquisition of novel vocabulary that they encounter for the first time while reading. Twenty-eight Dutch-speaking college students read twenty English paragraphs, twelve of which contained a critical area in one of four conditions: (I) known, existing word, (II) pseudoword, (III) pseudoword followed by a clarifying existing word and (IV) pseudoword preceded by a clarifying existing word. An eye-tracker recorded participants eye movements. Results suggest that learners fixate longer on the unknown pseudowords, a finding consistent with the literature on frequency effects. Performance on an immediate vocabulary post-test showed that exposure to the pseudowords led to modest learning gains. Finally, we observed increased processing times for the clarifying existing word when it followed but not when it preceded the novel word. The implications of these findings for a theory of 'noticing' in second language acquisition will be discussed.