NEWS BREAK

Article: **Canine prodigies can develop vocabularies like toddlers**

Section: **MAIN, A6**

Sunday's News Break selects an article from **Sunday, January 11, 2026,** of The Seattle Times print replica for an in-depth reading of the news. Read the selected article and answer the attached study questions.

Feel free to adapt this lesson for your students. For instance, some educators may assign this as a homework task, while others might facilitate the reading and discussion of questions within small groups or larger class discussions.

Please take a moment to review all NIE content before classroom use to ensure it is suitable for your students.*

Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1

- Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2

- Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

Learning Objectives:

The learning objective of this article is to explore how "gifted" dogs acquire language-like skills, specifically their ability to learn the names of objects through social eavesdropping rather than just direct instruction.

Pre-Reading Discussion:

- What do you think the article will be about, using this picture?
- Are there any clues? What can you infer?

Vocabulary Building:

Read this sentence, what do you think the highlighted words mean using *context clues*? A ***context clue*** is a word or words that are hints and refers to the sources of information outside of words that readers may use to predict the meaning of the word.

"But over the past two decades or so, scientists have identified a handful of outliers, canine ***prodigies*** that know the names for dozens or even hundreds of toys and can remember such labels for years."

Prodigy Guess:

Prodigy Definition:

Comprehension Questions:

1. The 7-year-old dog, who resides on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, knows the names of at least _____ toys — “froggy,” “crayon box” and “Pop-Tart,” among them — and can retrieve them on command.
2. Now, in a new study, scientists have found that Basket, and other dogs that share her advanced word-learning ability, have a skill that puts them functionally on par with whom? How?
3. But the study’s findings add to evidence that the cognitive and social abilities that underpin certain kinds of language learning are not limited to humans — and highlight just how adept dogs are at reading what?
4. “They’re very good at picking up on these _____,” said Shany Dror, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna, and an author of the study. “They’re so good that they can pick up on them equally well when the cues are directed to the dog or when they’re directed to someone else.”
5. Although many dogs can understand simple commands, like “sit” or “stay,” picking up the names of specific objects — a skill known as _____ _____— appears to be a much tougher task.
6. When dogs do manage to amass large vocabularies, they tend to do so through direct interactions with their owners, such as _____ _____ or _____ _____, Dror said.
7. On average, the dogs retrieved the new toys about ___% of the time, a success rate equivalent to when the owners introduced new toys to the dogs directly.
8. In a study published in the journal Scientific Reports in November, Kaminski and her colleagues found that compared with typical dogs, label learners were more interested in and focused on novel objects and exhibited better _____-_____.

Class Discussion Questions:

- What surprised (or stood out to) you in the article?
- At first, I thought _____, but now I think _____?

Deeper-Dive "Connect & Explain" comprehension questions for small groups, entire classes or journal entries and/ or essay prompts for extended enrichment:

The "Toddler" Connection: The article compares these dogs to 18-month-old toddlers. Why is this specific age used as a benchmark? What does it tell us about the "ceiling" of canine intelligence compared to human language development?

Nature vs. Nurture: Basket's owner spent hours training her, but the researchers also note that "label learning" is a rare, gifted trait. Do you think these dogs are born with a "prodigy" brain, or is their environment the most important factor? Explain your reasoning.

The Control Group: The study used a control group of 10 border collies that were *not* identified as gifted. Why was this group necessary for the researchers to prove their point?

Future Research: If you were a scientist working with Shany Dror, what would be the next experiment you would design to test the limits of these dogs? What is one question the article left unanswered?

NIE News Break program with other teachers. To sign-up for the print replica for your class, please register online or call 206/652-6290 or toll-free 1-888/775-2655.