



Group interactions in dialogic book reading activities as a language learning context in preschool



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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses specific group interactions in dialogic book reading activities as a possible and promising context for second language learning in preschool. Five native-German speaking preschool teachers were observed and videotaped whilst reading a picture book to several 3–6 year old immigrant children in a small group reading situation. The data analysis method employed was qualitative content analysis. The study revealed that group interactions varied considerably, but could provide opportunities for preschool children to learn language. In addition, the preschool teachers employed various instructional strategies at different linguistic and cognitive levels as learning input to the children. The study adds to our understanding of language promotion in preschool settings and is eventually applicable to teacher training.

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1. Introduction

Adult–child book reading is arguably one of the beneficial activities that support children's early language and cognitive development. There is already a rich body of literature on various themes concerning this practice, both in the form of theoretical and conceptual works as well as empirical research result reports. Most of the studies investigate the impacts or benefits of shared book reading activities on language acquisition in general (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Bus et al., 1995; Ninio, 1980; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Snow & Goldfield, 1983; Trivette & Dunst, 2007). Other studies put an emphasis on specific strategies and/or aspects of book reading practices which are considered as especially effective or useful, whilst others try to measure or evaluate different practices of book reading activities in different contexts.

There are three adult–child book reading activities that are widely practised and studied, namely 'Shared Book Reading', 'Interactive Shared Book Reading' and 'Dialogic Book Reading'. The three methods or types of reading differ with respect to the extent of children's participation during the reading session (Trivette & Dunst, 2007). A more detailed definition of each type can be found in *What Works Clearinghouse* (2006a, 2006b, 2007) as cited in Trivette and Dunst (2007).

Holdaway (1979) introduced the term 'Shared Book Reading' to refer to "a model for teaching children beginning literacy skills, such as learning one-to-one tracking of text and letter–sound relationships, whilst reading books with enlarged text" (as cited in Schickedanz & McGee, 2010). It is also defined as a reading session in which there is an adult reading a book to one child or a small group of children without requiring extensive interactions from them (Trivette & Dunst, 2007). Moreover, the term has been used interchangeably with the term 'Joint Book Reading', and both have become the most commonly accepted terms in research studies on adult–child book reading practices.

In addition to 'Shared Book Reading', there is another method called 'Interactive Shared Book Reading'. This is defined as a type of book reading in which an adult reads a book to a child or a small group of children using a variety of techniques to engage the children in the text (Trivette & Dunst, 2007). In this practice, there are specific techniques used before, during and after the book

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reading such as asking the child to answer questions, providing explanations, making the child attempt to read and pointing to pictures or words. More specifically, [Morrow \(1990\)](#) identified nine interactive reading behaviours performed by adults, namely: 1) Questioning; 2) scaffolding dialogue and responses; 3) offering praise or positive reinforcement; 4) giving or extending information; 5) clarifying information; 6) restating information; 7) directing discussion; 8) sharing personal reactions, and 9) relating concepts to life experiences.

Concerning the effectiveness of this method, researchers have given evidence that interactive book reading can enhance language development ([Durkin, 1966](#); [Teale, 1981](#)). It has also been argued that it is primarily through interactive dialogue that children gain their comprehension skills, increase their understandings of literacy conventions and are encouraged to enjoy reading ([DeBruin-Parecki, 1999](#)).

The third type of book reading is called “Dialogic Book Reading”, in which adult and child switch roles so that the child learns to become the storyteller with the assistance of the adult who functions as an active listener and questioner ([Trivette & Dunst, 2007](#); [Whitehurst, 1992](#)). It was first developed and introduced by Whitehurst and his colleagues from the Stony Brook Reading and Language Project in 1988 ([Whitehurst, 1992](#); [Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003](#)). In this practice, the adult and child have a conversation about a book ([Whitehurst, 1992](#)), with the adult helping the child to become the teller of the story. In other words, the adult assumes the roles of a listener, questioner and audience for the child. This procedure is based on the premise that “children learn most from books when they are actively involved” ([Whitehurst, 1992](#)). It supports the underlying theories of the mechanisms of language acquisition which argue that “practices in using language, feedback regarding language and appropriately scaffolded adult-child interaction in the context of picture book reading all facilitate young children’s language development” ([Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003](#); see also [Domenech & Krah, 2014](#)–in this issue; [Quasthoff & Wild, 2014](#)–in this issue).

Are the three book reading methods similarly effective? [Trivette and Dunst \(2007\)](#) produced a research-based synthesis study comparing the effectiveness of the three types of book reading practices by examining the relevant literature. They found thirteen studies involving 729 children and carried out three syntheses. Their findings showed that of the thirteen studies, six studies discussed dialogic book reading, four discussed interactive book reading and three discussed shared book reading. They concluded that those types of reading interventions that more actively involve children are likely to give more positive benefits. In other words, the two reading interventions that were considered the most effective were interactive and dialogic book reading, both of which made use of various techniques and strategies to stimulate children to participate by asking questions, prompting descriptions, asking for elaboration and completing parts of a story. Furthermore, dialogic book reading was found to be the more structured procedure in its application ([Trivette & Dunst, 2007](#)).

These findings, then, confirmed relevant previous studies e.g. by [Whitehurst \(1992\)](#), [Lonigan and Whitehurst \(1998\)](#), [Hargrave and Senechal \(2000\)](#), and [Cutspec \(2006\)](#). In addition, [De Temple and Snow \(2003\)](#) stated that doing interactive and dialogic book reading could provide richer semantic contexts for novel words which tended to have a longer-lasting effect than mere straight reading.

Most likely based on the benefits it is supposed to contribute to children’s development, shared book reading is a daily activity commonly practised also in German preschools. However, there is a distinct lack of empirical research on this particular activity. One of the most quoted studies has been [Wieler’s \(1997\)](#), who investigated different book reading practices in home settings. Another German study, [Albers \(2003\)](#), also investigated shared book reading practices in early education institutions. However, book reading was only a small part of his study, which focused more on general language and interaction aspects. Apart from these studies, not much is known about how German early-childhood teachers practise this activity in a preschool context.

However, the notion of dialogic book reading as an activity to promote literacy for preschool children has received increasing attention lately. There has been an open, public debate in the online resource for German early childhood education practitioners such as the “Online Handbook of Kindergarten Pedagogy” (*Kindergarten Pädagogik Online Handbuch*) concerning the contribution of dialogic book reading procedures to children’s language learning. An on-going large scale quantitative experimental research project has also been initiated by a team of researchers from the Faculty of Psychology of the Justus-Liebig University of Giessen, who investigates the effectiveness of dialogic book reading. But information is still rather limited on how early childhood teachers perform shared book reading activities—particularly dialogic book reading, and how such activities can be considered as a potential language learning context. Therefore, the current study was done in the first place as an attempt to throw some more light on this approach.

1.1. Related literature

1.1.1. Adults’ strategies in book reading

A study conducted by [Ninio \(1980\)](#) pinpointed that “labelling” was a strategy most frequently used by adults in assisting children during a book reading activity. Furthermore, the use of different styles of labelling strategies seemed to be related to socioeconomic status. Her study showed that mothers coming from a high SES group tend to associate their labelling styles with the size of the different vocabularies their children had, whilst mothers from a low SES group seemed to ask “what-questions” according to their children’s vocabulary levels but did not adjust their “where-questions” and labelling statements at the same time ([Ninio, 1980](#)).

[Reese and Cox \(1999\)](#) compared the effects of three different parent reading styles, namely “describer”, “comprehender” and “performance-oriented”. Describer style was understood as a reading style in which adults spent a higher proportion of time labelling and describing the pictures and requesting evaluations from their children. When an adult spent a higher proportion of time providing high-level inferences and evaluations as well as requesting and providing personal experiences, he/she was considered as employing a “comprehender” style. “Performance-based oriented”, on the other hand, would include a dramatic reading with few interruptions and

an analytic discussion at the end of a reading which focused on story comprehension, definition of unusual words and relation of the book to children's experiences.

This particular study by [Reese and Cox \(1999\)](#) also found that the “describer” style was beneficial mostly to supporting children's vocabulary and print skills and would work best for younger children. From the “comprehender” style benefited more linguistically advanced children, whereas “performance- oriented” would be advantageous when it was a matter of children's initial skills.

A study by [Reese et al. \(2003\)](#) aimed at investigating various mother reading styles in a New Zealand context. Coding categories for maternal utterances were developed by adapting a coding scheme constructed by [Haden et al. \(1996\)](#). The categories included the following strategies: 1) “labels”; 2) “picture descriptions”; 3) “evaluations”; 4) “inferences”; 5) “general knowledge”; 6) “whole book”; 7) “confirmation/correction”, and 8) “personal experience”. The results of this study suggested that White New Zealand mothers used a highly interactive style with their children, regardless of demand level. It was also found that these mothers did not adjust their styles to their children's age or language level.

[Moschovaki and Meadows \(2005\)](#) studied the cognitive engagement of kindergarten teachers and children during book reading activities. They stated that teachers' cognitive engagement was highly correlated with children's engagement and developed a particular categorization of cognitive demand level which adopted the categorization previously established by [Wells \(1975\)](#), [Blank et al. \(1978\)](#), and [Dickinson and Smith \(1994\)](#). The two authors classified cognitive levels into three, namely: 1) low cognitive level; 2) medium cognitive level, and 3) high cognitive level. The findings of their study showed that during the reading of fictional books and narrative texts, it was the teachers who mostly did the text recall and labelling, which could be considered as “low cognitive level”. However, when reading information books and expository texts, teachers attempted to provide some higher cognitive level tasks.

[Higham \(2008\)](#) likewise employed the cognitive demand level categorisation developed by [Dickinson and Smith \(1994\)](#). She discovered that teachers used mainly low cognitive utterances. But she also found that teachers seemed to produce more high level cognitive utterances when focused not only on the story but also on other concepts. They also gave children the focus of control in reading sessions. Moreover, these studies confirmed a more general result of a previous study conducted by [Smith et al. \(2004\)](#) which revealed that teachers in Literacy Class used lower cognitive interaction during their lessons.

Other studies revealed that adults use a particular form of language as one of their strategies during shared book reading, called “decontextualized language” ([Dickinson & Snow, 1987](#); [Morgan & Goldstein, 2004](#)). Decontextualized language is formally defined as “concepts and notions which are removed from the immediate situation, and is used to convey information to audiences who share limited information with the speaker or who are removed from the physical context” ([Morgan & Goldstein, 2004](#)). Decontextualized language in book reading activities was found in the use of utterances which signified cognitive activities (e.g. “think”, “know”, and “believe”), discussions of word definitions and cohesive narratives.

In the framework of dialogic book reading, adults' strategies mainly refer to the specific verbal strategies of “prompting”, “evaluating”, “expanding” and “recalling”. The first of these comes in various forms, such as “completing”, “recalling”, “open-ended”, “wh-question” and “distancing”. These strategies are to some degree in line with the other strategies mentioned above. “Evaluating” for instance is somewhat similar to “confirmation/correction” strategy as coded by [Reese et al. \(2003\)](#), and “expanding” conveys the idea of “elaborating” (also by [Reese et al., 2003](#)). However, what makes dialogic book reading mainly different from the other types of book reading activity is that it gives the spotlight to children and so allows them to play a more active role as a storyteller (cf. [Whitehurst, 1992](#); [Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003](#)). Hence, adults' activities in this strategy should be supporting (or scaffolding) children to actively participate in the book reading process.

1.1.2. Children's participation in book reading

In book reading activities, children have been found to participate by labelling pictures, commenting on the pictures/story, repeating what the reader (adult) says and talking about personal experiences ([Fletcher & Jean-Francois, 1998](#); [Moschovaki & Meadows, 2005](#); [Ninio & Bruner, 1978](#)). [Morrow and Smith \(1990\)](#) worked up a categorisation of these verbal behaviours, the first of which was related to the story structure. Children were observed to focus on such things as: 1) Setting; 2) characters; 3) theme; 4) plot episodes, and 5) resolution. Their second category was related to meaning, with children showing the following behaviours: 1) Labelling; 2) detail; 3) interpreting (association, elaborations); 4) prediction; 5) drawing from one's own experience; 6) word definitions, and 7) narrational behaviour. The third category of verbal behaviours mostly concerned the print, such as: 1) Questions or comments about letters; 2) questions or comments about sounds; 3) questions or comments about words; 4) reading words; 5) reading sentences, and 6) book management. The fourth category focused on illustrations; the fifth category was about the total number of questions, and the sixth looked at the total number of comments.

Moreover, [Morrow and Smith \(1990\)](#) demonstrated that these verbal behaviours depended on the number of the participants in the book reading practice. Children asked more questions in one-to-one shared reading settings than in small group or in whole-class settings. On the other hand, children in small group and whole-class settings were found to be more active verbally than in the one-to-one setting. Furthermore, children had more opportunity to participate in one-to-one and small group settings, and were also found to make comments rather than ask questions ([Morrow & Smith, 1990](#)).

In dialogic book reading situation in particular, children are expected to become storytellers as well as to participate actively by responding to adults' strategies ([Whitehurst, 1992](#); [Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003](#)). In other words, children who are involved in a dialogic book reading activity will be frequently encouraged to answer questions, follow the adults' prompts and tell the story along with them.

1.1.3. Interaction in book reading activities

There can be little doubt that the type of book reading most advantageous for children's language development is the one which involves interaction (Trivette & Dunst, 2007). Ninio and Bruner observed in their study of 1978 that there was a particular interaction during a mother–child shared book reading session in the form of a routine interactive dialogue. They identified the following four steps involved in the interaction: 1) attention-getting dialogue; 2) questions; 3) labelling, and 4) feedback. This interaction pattern would proceed until the mother decided to provide assistance or to allow the child to participate independently, which also indicated an instance of scaffolding strategies used by the mother (Ninio & Bruner, 1978).

Another researcher, Cochran-Smith (1986), also recognised adult–child interaction during book reading sessions in the form of obvious turn-taking patterns where there was an exchange of questions and answers by both the adult and the child. This particular activity was claimed to enrich the child's understanding of the story as well as the prints and the language used. Furthermore, it was found that those conversations which promoted most interest and responses from both adult and child were the ones that connected the text with real life (Cochran-Smith, 1986).

DeBruin-Parecki (1999) argued that if it was the quality of interaction in book reading that could promote literacy development, it would be necessary to evaluate both adult and child behaviours. She stated this in response to several previous attempts at constructing joint book reading measurement instruments (Klesius & Griffith, 1996; Morrow, 1988, 1990) which "focused exclusively in [should be on] rating the adult's behaviour, not on the corresponding behaviours of the child". In her study, she therefore constructed an instrument called 'Adult/Child Interactive Reading Inventory' (ACIRI). ACIRI is an observational interactive instrument, which according to DeBruin-Parecki (1999), would not be "patronizing, insulting, or threatening to participants". It is employed to observe adult (in this study, parents)/child dyads under natural conditions. The observed interactive behaviours of both adult and child are grouped into three categories: 1) enhancing attention to text; 2) promoting interactive reading and supporting comprehension, and 3) using literacy strategies. Each of these categories comprises four interactive behaviours. As its validity and reliability have been confirmed, ACIRI could be used as an instrument to assess types of and progress in adult and child reading behaviours (DeBruin-Parecki, 1999).

Furthermore, De Temple and Snow (2003) offered the concept of "instructive and helpful interaction". This particular interaction is defined as interaction in which information about the meaning of a word is available and during which the child's attention and learning is scaffolded. In addition, during book reading practices, there would be some occurrences of 'non-immediate talk'. Non-immediate talk is a kind of talk produced in the interaction during book reading practices that goes beyond the information in the text or illustrations, such as making predictions and connecting the story to the child's experiences. This specific type of talk should be taken into account because it has been proved to be beneficial to children's measures of vocabulary, story comprehension, definitions and emergent literacy (De Temple & Snow, 2003).

Referring specifically to the context of dialogic book reading, Whitehurst (1992) explained a particular type of interaction between adult and child that includes situations in which the adult: 1) prompts the child to say something about the book; 2) evaluates the child's responses; 3) expands the child's responses by rephrasing and adding information to it, and 4) repeats the prompt to make sure that the child has learned from the expansion. These strategies are casually referred to as "PEER", an acronym of the first letters of the four strategies (Whitehurst, 1992).

Besides 'PEER', there are also other questioning strategies that adults can use in a dialogic book reading activity, namely the 'CROWD' strategies which are basically different prompting strategies. First, there is a "Completion Prompt", in which adults ask fill-in-the-blank questions. The second is a "Recall Prompt", in which adults pose questions that require children to recall some aspects of the books. Number three is called an "Open-ended prompt", in which adults encourage children to respond to the book in their own words, whilst the fourth is a "wh-Prompt" where adults use "what", "where" and "why" questions. The last is labelled "Distancing Prompt", in which adults ask questions that require children to relate the content of the book to aspects of their own lives (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003).

The effectiveness of these specific interactional strategies of dialogic book reading has been investigated and all findings indicate that they bring about positive effects on children's language and emergent literacy skills (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003).

Whilst most of the studies discussed above put an emphasis on the adult–child, one-to-one interaction during book reading activities performed in home settings, there are far fewer studies that research small group book reading activities in early childhood educational institutions. One of these is (Morrow and Smith (1990) who identified adult verbal behaviours during interaction in a primary school classroom story reading situation. The study revealed that adult verbal behaviours were used to manage the story reading: teachers introduced the story, provided background information about the book and redirected irrelevant discussions back to the story. Furthermore, verbal behaviours were also employed to give prompts. Adults invited children to comment or ask questions throughout the story and scaffolded responses for the children when they did not respond. They also used verbal behaviours to support and inform the children, e.g. answering questions, reacting to comments from children, relating responses to real-life experiences and providing positive reinforcement of children's purposes.

In addition, these verbal behaviours were observed to be similar across different settings (i.e. one-to-one, small group, whole-class). The remaining differences could be easily explained as resulting from the specific demands of managing different group sizes (Morrow & Smith, 1990). Praise, for example, was given more frequently in one-to-one and small-group setting whereas negative comments and managing behaviours were observed to be given most of the time in a whole-class setting.

In contrast to the work surveyed above, the current study aims at investigating several aspects embedded in small group book reading activities which have not been covered in the literature, namely peer interaction and bi- and/multilingualism. Peer interaction

is considered an important aspect to address because book reading practices in German kindergartens are normally done in small groups and this type of interaction should therefore not be taken for granted. Peer interaction has great potential for supporting children's language development (see *Stude, 2014—in this issue*), including the development of a second language (*Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004; Tabors, 1997*). Moreover, book reading activities are to some extent considered as 'adult-dominated' and highly structured, and therefore it would be interesting to see how peer interaction can work in such a situation.

Concerning the aspect of bi- and multilingualism, *Barrera and Bauer (2003)* pointed out that previous studies had not really focused on how bilingual children were involved in a shared book reading activity conducted by adults with a different native language. This situation is actually commonly found in German kindergartens, in which native German-speaking teachers deal with children with an immigrant background who acquire German as their second language. Thus, this study might be able to offer a unique perspective that is different from those of the previous studies.

2. Theoretical and methodological framework of the study

This study aims at contextualising some concepts and issues of book reading practices, and dialogic book reading in particular, for the current situation and practices in German preschools. Particular teachers' strategies and children's behaviours observed in group interactions during book reading activities will be discussed, on the theoretical assumption that these interactions have some potential for preschool children's second language learning process.

The study was designed primarily as a qualitative observational study. The main data for the study were videotapes of dialogic book reading practices by five German preschool teachers, who read a particular picture book to a small group of immigrant children between the ages of 3 and 6 years who were learning German as a second language. The duration of each videotaped dialogic oriented book reading session ranged from 8 min to 30 min. The book reading session itself was done in the reading corner of each participating kindergarten as a part of their daily routine activities. The videotaped data were transcribed by adapting some basic features of GAT Transcription Convention developed by *Selting et al. (1998)* in a simplified version. Then, the transcripts were translated by two native speakers of German into English. Afterwards, the data were analysed by employing the content analysis technique, in which coding categories were developed to identify teacher's strategies and children's behaviours.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. General overview of group interactions during dialogic book reading practices

Group interaction in this study was operationally defined as a particular situation in which the teacher had conversations with more than one child on the same topic and context sequence. In this form of interaction, it was observed that the teachers and the children both took turns initiating the interaction. Children, in particular, interacted not only with the teacher but also with their peers (peer interaction). Furthermore, concerning teachers' overall book reading strategies, they were observed to not fully practise the dialogic book reading as prescribed by the experts even though they employed the PEER and CROWD strategies to some extent (see below) and followed a more 'interactive' book reading procedure. The following transcript excerpts will give several different examples of group interaction during dialogic book reading.

Example 1	
Child	3und was macht er? ((zeigt)) <i>And what is he doing? ((point))</i>
Teacher	ja, was macht denn jetzt da der kleine Esel? <i>Well, what is the little donkey doing now?</i>
Child 4	[(Spielzeug gesucht)] <i>Looked for toy</i>
Teacher	Guck mal, was liegt denn hier? Erstmal müssen wir mal gucken <i>Look, what is lying here then? First we have to look</i>
Teacher	Was ist das Große hier? Was liegt da? ((zeigt)) <i>What is this big thing here? What is lying there? ((point))</i>
Child 1	das war ihre ¹ Geschenk <i>It was her gift</i>
Teacher	das ist das Geschenk ((blickt zu C1)) <i>That's the gift ((gaze directed towards C1))</i>
Child 4	Nein, [die Drache () die Drache ()] <i>No, the kite... the kite...</i>
Child 3	[und () [da hängt die::, ((zeigt))] die hängen das hier hin weil das auch schön ist. <i>And it is hung there... they hung here because it's also nice</i>
Teacher	das ist das Geschenk, da hat die Tuba recht ((zeigt auf C2)) <i>That's the gift. Tuba is right.</i>
Teacher	Und der Jenat hat auch recht ((zeigt auf C4)) Das ist der Drachen <i>And Jenat is also right. That's the kite</i>

(Excerpt 1, Transcript 1, Case 1)

¹ Incorrect form of possessive pronoun in terms of 'grammatical gender'.

In this example, a long stretch of interaction sequence was observed which included a series of discussion of the teacher with three participating children, namely Child 1, Child 3 and Child 4. The interaction was initiated by the child (Child 3) then responded to by the teacher (E) with a question of his own, which became the trigger for the other children's responses.

Example 2	
Teacher	und da; wer kann denn die Torte sehen? <i>And there; who can see the cake?</i>
Children	Ich <i>I!</i>
Teacher	Wo ist die Torte? <i>Where is the cake?</i>
Children	((point))
Teacher	!GUT! <i>!GOOD!</i>
Child 3	nicht, das ist kein ² Torte <i>No, it's not a cake</i>
Teacher	doch, das ist eine Torte glaub ich. <i>Yes, it is. It is a cake, I think</i>
Child 4	das hier ((zeigt)) <i>This here ((point))</i>
(Excerpt 2, Transcript 2, Case 2)	

² Incorrect form of pronoun in terms of grammatical gender.

In this second example, it was the teacher who initiated the group interaction by asking a question. The pattern of this interaction sequence was rather similar to the common “turn-taking” question–answer pattern found in the one-to-one interaction mechanism (cf. Ninio & Bruner, 1978). It can be seen here that the teacher gave feedback to the children's responses to her trigger. Similarly, the children also responded to the teacher's feedback.

The next example provides a slightly different situation. In the previous examples, the children responded mostly to the teachers' strategies; in the next example, however, they responded to their peer's behaviour.

Example 3	
Teacher	wo ist der Drachen hier, Ernest? <i>Where is the kite here, Ernest?</i>
Teacher	Kannst du ihn sehen? (2.0) wo ist er? <i>Can you see it? (2.0) Where is it</i>
Child 1	ich weiß es <i>I know it</i>
Child 2	ich auch <i>Me too</i>
Child 5	((point))
(Excerpt 3, Transcript 5, Case 5)	

Thus, in general, it can be seen in longer stretches of continuous discourse that group interactions during dialogic book reading include conversations/dialogues between teachers and children as well as among children themselves. Coding only teachers' strategies would, therefore, provide an insufficient picture of potential learning contexts. From the perspective of potential learning contexts, the conversations/dialogues reflected teachers' strategies and children's behaviours that could be beneficial for children's language learning, especially of vocabulary and grammar. The empirical findings potentially relevant to acquisition processes will be discussed further in the following sections.

3.2. Contexts for acquiring word meaning and concepts

One of the benefits of a book reading activity is related to children's vocabulary development. As De Temple and Snow (2003) showed, book reading activities can provide a context where rare and complicated words can be introduced and explained to children with the support of pictures and texts. Furthermore, Zevenbergen and Whitehurst (2003) suggested that a particular type of book reading, i.e. dialogic book reading, significantly contributes to children's vocabulary gain. This result was replicated in this study, where a number of instances of potential vocabulary learning situations were found.

Example 1	
Teacher	was macht denn die Mama hier jetzt mit dem? ((zeigt)) <i>What is the mother doing with him now? ((point))</i>
Child 2, 3, 4	duschen <i>Showering</i>

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Example 1	
Teacher	ist das eine Dusche kommt das Wasser von oben <i>Is that a shower means the water comes from above</i>
Teacher	genau Yosef-Emre sagt nochmal. Baden. ((blickt zu C5)) <i>Right. Yosef-Emre, say it once again. Bathe. ((gaze directed towards C5))</i>
Child 3, 4, 5	baden <i>Bathe</i>

(Excerpt 4, Transcript 2, Case 2)

The teacher in this example asked the children to describe a picture by using a wh-question prompt. After the children responded to her question, she gave feedback to their answers by evaluating. She also tried at the same time to connect the context of the word found in the text to the children's general knowledge, a strategy that can be categorised as a distancing prompt (cf. Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). Moreover, the teacher used an explicit repetition strategy for introducing a new vocabulary item. In this case, however, the children gave merely a short verbal response.

Example 2	
Teacher	Der kleine Esel springt aus dem Wägelchen <i>The little donkey jumps out of the cart</i>
Teacher	was ist denn eigentlich ein Wägelchen? <i>What then is a "cart"?</i>
Child 1	das (-) tut weh ((zeigt)) <i>That (-) hurts ((point))</i>
Teacher	nein, guckt mal ((zeigt)) Der WAGEN ist das. (---) ne? <i>No, look ((point)) it is a WAGON (---) ne?</i>
Teacher	WÄGELCHEN. Kann man auch dazu sagen. <i>CART. One can also call it that.</i>

(Excerpt 5, Transcript 3, Case 3)

The example above contains another wh-prompt used by the teacher. Different from the first example, the wh-prompt was employed by the teacher in order to ask the children for the meaning of a particular word. This strategy was not responded to in appropriate fashion by the children. Out of six children in this case, there was only one child (Child 1) who responded to the teacher's trigger. Yet, her response was not relevant to the teacher's question. The teacher followed up directly by explaining what the word referred to rather than giving another prompt to scaffold the children.

Example 3	
Teacher	was könnte das für ein Tier sein? <i>What kind of animal could that be?</i>
Child 1	Esel <i>Donkey</i>
Teacher	ein (---) Esel, aber der hat hier oben noch wie (---) zwei Hörner = das könnte ein (2.0) [Steinbock] oder ein Widder sein. <i>(---) donkey, but he has up here something like two horns = it could be a (2.0) [goat] or a ram</i>

(Excerpt 6, Transcript 2, Case 2)

The example above indicates another use of a wh-prompt by the teacher to ask the children to identify a specific animal pictured in the book. Instead of using a simple "what is that" question, she used a longer pattern which also prompted the children to predict the answer by using visual cues from the picture. Getting a short response from a child, the teacher seemed to confirm it by repeating the child's answer. She continued by evaluating and expanding the answer and then offered another idea, which also illustrated the introduction of other words – in this case, names of different animals – to the children.

Example 4	
Teacher	was ist das da? Wer weiß das von euch? <i>What is that there? Which of you know that?</i>
Child 4	ich <i>I</i>
Child 3	ist das; ist das ein Hase? ((zeigt)) Nein warum sieht das so? ((zeigt)) <i>Is that; is that a rabbit? ((point)) No why does it look like that? ((point))</i>
Child 4	ich weiß, Haseohr <i>I know, rabbit's ear</i>
Teacher	Hör mal was der Jenat gesagt hat. Was ist das? ((zeigt)) <i>Listen to what Jenat has said. What is that? ((point))</i>

(continued)

Example 4	
Child 4	Hasenohren <i>Rabbit's ears</i>
Teacher	das sind (---) Ohren. Aber das sind keine Hasenohren ((blickt zu C4)) <i>Those are (---) ears. But those are not rabbit's ears ((gaze directed towards C4))</i>
Teacher	sondern? ESELohren. <i>But? DONKEY's ears</i>

(Excerpt 7, Transcript 1, Case 1)

This instance offers a longer stretch of group interaction, in which the teacher started by asking the children about a particular thing pictured in the book. The children gave different responses. One child, coded as Child 1, demonstrated that he knew the answer. Another child, coded as Child 3, joined in the conversation by offering an answer in the form of a question. The teacher then followed the children's feedback up by a confirmatory question to the first child who first provided and then corrected the idea, by introducing vocabulary that was new to the children, namely "donkey's ears". Furthermore, the children also demonstrated their knowledge of the name of different animals, such as "rabbit". These observed children's behaviours conformed to the categorisation of children's verbal behaviours by [Morrow and Smith \(1990\)](#), who suggested that what children mostly do during book reading activities is labelling and relating texts to their own experience.

Example 5	
Teacher	Und was macht der jetzt denn hier in seiner Kiste, Fiola? ((blickt zu C1)) ((zeigt)) <i>And what is he doing here now in his box, Fiola? ((gaze towards C1)) ((point))</i>
Teacher	(---) Was sucht der da? <i>(---) What is he looking for there? (5.0)</i>
Teacher	Vielleicht kann Nilay dir helfen ((blickt zu C2)) <i>Maybe Nilay can help you ((gaze directed towards C2))</i>
Teacher	Was sucht der in der Kiste? <i>What is he looking for in the box?</i>
Child 2	das (4.0) das, das hier ((zeigt)) <i>This (4.0) this, this here ((point))</i>
Teacher	ein anderes Spielzeug (---) sucht der raus. Was er verschenken kann <i>He's looking out (---) another toy. Something he can give as a gift</i>
Teacher	Weil er den Drachen !SO! gerne behalten möchte <i>Because he would really like to keep the kite for himself</i>

(Excerpt 8, Transcript 5, Case 5)

Similar to the teachers in the previous examples, the teacher in this case also made use of a wh-question prompt. When the child who was given the floor did not answer, she addressed the same question to another child, who responded only by using the demonstrative "this", along with the non-verbal behaviour of pointing. The teacher directly provided a follow-up to the response by introducing the word "toy" and she also elaborated the causal context.

A summary of the five examples above relating to potential vocabulary learning situations shows that the teachers participating in this study employed mostly wh-question prompts as their instructional strategy. This strategy was used mainly to get the children to label and describe pictures. The wh-prompts given by the teachers differed considerably in terms of their cognitive demand level as well as their linguistic complexity. To a lesser extent, the teachers also elaborated the definitions and concepts of the words they introduced. In addition, the children responded most of the time based on the teachers' strategies.

3.3. Possible contexts for grammar learning: the use of nouns and verbs and sentence complexity

In addition to vocabulary learning, group interaction during dialogic book reading activity offers also a potential context for grammar learning. [Valdez-Menchaca and Whitehurst \(1992\)](#) in their study indicated that children involved in dialogic reading programmes excelled in terms of sentence complexity and variety in their use of nouns and verbs. In this study, some situations in which grammatical aspects were introduced by the teachers to the children, who were at that time acquiring German as their second language, could be documented so that it can be shown how learning opportunities are embedded in book reading interaction. The following transcript excerpts will exemplify some of those situations.

Example 1	
Child 3	[wo ist die Haus?] hier, ne? ((zeigt)) <i>[where is the house?] here, right? ((point))</i>
Teacher	das ist EIN Haus. <i>That is A house</i>

(Excerpt 9, Transcript 1, Case 1)

One of the most common problems faced by children learning German as a second language is related to the use of gender and the articles (Tracy, 2008). The example above illustrates this phenomenon perfectly. The child (C3) used an incorrect definite article for the neutral word “Haus” (English: house). The teacher corrected the child’s utterance by saying a simple sentence in which the correct indefinite neutral article “ein” was used and emphasized. She did not, however, directly replace the child’s incorrect use of the definite feminine article “die” by the correct form for the particular noun Haus being addressed, i.e. the definite neutral article “das”. Thus, it was left to the child to infer further the correct form of the question “wo ist das Haus?”.

Another problem that children have to deal with when acquiring German as a second language is related to the plural number of nouns (Tracy, 2008). The following examples will provide an insight into this phenomenon and how the participating teachers dealt with it.

Example 2	
Child 1	ein Drache A kite*
Teacher	ein Drachen. A kite
(Excerpt 10, Transcript 2, Case 2)	
Example 3	
Child 1	Drache kite*
Teacher	der Drachen A kite
(Excerpt 11, Transcript 5, Case 5)	

The two examples above illustrate similar cases. The word intended was “Drachen” (Masculine; English equivalent: kite). The children from two different groups made a similar error, producing the word “Drache” instead. The word “Drache” also exists in German but refers to the imaginary animal “dragon”. There are at least two ways to account for the occurrence of this error. One explanation is that the children were more used to hear the word “Drache” (“dragon”)—probably in other fairy tales, storybooks or cartoon movies. The other possibilities would be related to the confusion of the noun forms. In German, the plural form of some nouns is formed by adding the inflectional suffix *-n* (as in *Pfütze-n*). Therefore, the children may well have assumed that the word “Drachen” was a plural form of the singular word “Drache”.

Both teachers in examples 2 and 3 corrected the noun form produced by the children. However, in example 2, the child (coded as Child 1) used already an indefinite article that seemed to be correct, therefore the teacher merely confirmed by repeating the similar form. In example 3, the child (also coded as Child 1) only mentioned the noun without using an article. Thus, the teacher corrected his utterance by adding a definite article “der” (English: the; for masculine form).

Example 4	
Child 2	Sternen. Blauen Stars. Blue.
Teacher	blaue Sterne Blue stars
(Excerpt 12, Transcript 5, Case 5)	

This is another instance of the interactive work on noun forms and word order. The child in this case, coded as Child 2, uttered an incorrect plural form for the word “Stern” (English: star). She did not seem to be able to produce a correct noun phrase; instead she mentioned the noun and adjective separately, one after another. The teacher corrected her utterance by providing the correct noun phrase.

Moreover, there were also instances where verb forms and their use were focused, which are illustrated in the next examples.

Example 5	
Teacher	was macht er da, der kleine? ((blickt zu C1)) What is he doing there, the little (donkey)? ((gaze directed towards C1))
Child 1	Er bleibt stehen* He stays/stops*
Teacher	Er steht da.(---) Da steht er (--) auf allen VIEREN ((zeigt)) He is standing there (---) He is standing there on all four legs ((point))
(Excerpt 13, Transcript 1, Case 1)	

In this example, Child 1 produced a correct verb form which was semantically inappropriate. The teacher immediately corrected her by giving the correct verb as well as elaborating the use of that particular verb. In contrast, in the next example, the teacher did not have to repair the (correct) utterance of the child; yet by producing a confirmatory sentence she implicitly exemplified the subject–verb agreement rule and thus provided further grammatical input.

Example 6	
Child 4	ich glaub nicht
Teacher	<i>I believe not</i> du glaubst nicht. (–) <i>You believe not.</i>
(Excerpt 14, Transcript 5, Case 5)	

Aside from the correction and production of noun and verb forms, the grammar-related learning occasions embedded in group interaction during dialogic book reading can be looked at in terms of sentence complexity. The examples below will illustrate this aspect.

Example 7	
Teacher	das Haus ((zeigt)) das ist WEIT weg <i>the house ((point)) it is far away</i>
Teacher	Und je weiter was weg ist, umso !KLEINER! wird das <i>And the farther away something is, the smaller it will look</i>
Child 3	aber sei Mama muss so klein sein. bisschen kleiner <i>But his mother must be this small. A bit smaller</i>
(Excerpt 15, Transcript 1, Case 1)	

In this example, the teacher used a specific sentence pattern to describe the complex comparative form “*je... umso*”, which is equivalent to English “the more/-er, the more/-er”. The child (coded as Child 3) was also observed starting to use a comparative form of the adjective in her response.

Example 8	
Teacher	muss man nach draußen [gehen, ne?] <i>One has to go outside, [right?]</i>
Child 4	[aber in der] Wohnung kann man das machen. einFenster aufmachen, und; und dann kann man den ³ auch steigen lassen. <i>[but in the] house one can do it. Open the window up and; and then one can also fly it</i>
(Excerpt 16, Transcript 5, Case 5)	

³ Accusative case.

The child (coded as Child 4) in this example produced a rather long sentence using different patterns such as modal and phrasal verbs. He also used different case forms (for the nominative and accusative).

This second set of examples show that the teachers were able to facilitate children's grammar learning by giving implicit corrections as well as modelling the use of more complex grammatical patterns. Thus, group interaction during dialogic book reading would seem to be a good context in which adults can give grammar instruction to children.

3.4. Additional findings: cognitive level and decontextualized language

There are two other important aspects that could be addressed regarding the teachers' strategies and the children's behaviours in group interactions during dialogic book reading, namely cognitive demand level and the use of decontextualized language. In this study, the cognitive levels of the teachers' strategies and children's behaviours were analysed and interpreted using a classification developed by Moschovaki and Meadows (2005), who recognised three categories for the cognitive demand level, namely: 1) Low cognitive level; 2) medium cognitive level, and 3) high cognitive level. The term ‘decontextualized language’ employed in this study, as previously stated, was analysed based on the concept offered by Morgan and Goldstein (2004). Consequently, the use of decontextualized language in this sense is categorised based on the following three types of utterances: 1) text-to-life, 2) explanatory and 3) interpretation (Morgan & Goldstein, 2004; van Kleeck et al., 1997).

The findings revealed that the teachers' strategies during the group interaction mostly belonged to the low cognitive level, with medium and high level cognitive strategies not being frequently used. This was in line with the findings of several other studies (cf. Dickinson et al., 2003; Higham, 2008; Moschovaki & Meadows, 2005; Smith et al., 2004). In addition, the children's responses in this study were also mainly on a low cognitive level, which seemed to correspond to the teachers' strategies. Regarding the linguistic aspects, the teachers employed decontextualized language in their strategies, for instance when they tried to connect the story to the children's lives and experiences, to demonstrate and ask about general knowledge, or explain

word definitions and concepts and infer/make predictions. The following series of examples will highlight the uses of high cognitive level strategies and behaviours as well as decontextualized language by both the teachers and the children.

Example 1	
Teacher	warum gehen die jetzt schon nach Hause? ((blickt zu C1)) <i>Why are they going back home already now? ((gaze directed towards C1))</i>
Child 1	weil es dunkel ist <i>Because it's dark</i>

(Excerpt 17, Transcript 1, Case 1)

In this example, the teacher asked the child to find the reason why something happened in the story. This strategy challenged the child to exercise thinking skills and provide an interpretation beyond what was obviously mentioned in the story. Therefore, it could be argued that the teacher made use of a high level cognitive strategy which was responded appropriately by the child (in this case, coded as Child 1). Moreover, both strategy and response could be considered a manifestation of decontextualized language utterances, because a subordinate conjunction (*weil*; English equivalence: because) was triggered.

Example 2	
Teacher	'mhm du hast auch ein Bett zuhause oder? ((blickt zu C1)) <i>Hm you also have a bed at home, right? ((gaze directed towards C1))</i>
Child 2	Ich auch <i>Me too</i>
Child 1	ich hab zwei weil meine Schwester schläft auch <i>I have two because my sister sleeps too</i>
Child 4	Ich hab auch zwei <i>I also have two</i>

(Excerpt 18, Transcript 2, Case 2)

The teacher in the example above attempted to link a context in the book to the children's life. This strategy could be categorised as belonging to a high cognitive level after [Moschovaki and Meadows \(2005\)](#) and also as a "text-to-life" utterance of decontextualized language ([Morgan & Goldstein, 2004](#)). Furthermore, the children were also found to give similarly high level responses to this kind of trigger. Finally, the example also shows the children reacting to their peer's utterance.

Example 3	
Teacher	Habt ihr eine Idee wie man den Drachen steigen lassen kann? <i>Do you have any idea how one can fly a kite?</i>
Teacher	Mahmudi? ((blickt zu C4)) <i>Mahmudi? ((gaze directed towards C4))</i>
Child 4	man muss nur an die Luft werfen und das Seil festhalten <i>One only has to throw it in the air and hold the cord tightly</i>
Teacher	genau, man braucht <i>Exactly, one needs</i>
Teacher	ah, ganz viel Luft braucht man und man muss an dem Seil festhalten ((zeigt)) <i>Ah, one needs a really lot of wind and one has to hold the cord tightly ((point))</i>
Teacher	Gut dass da schon ein Seil dran ist. (---)'mhm. <i>It's good that there's already a cord (---) hm</i>
Teacher	(---) Kann man das auch in der Wohnung machen? <i>(---) Can one do it in the flat too?</i>
Children	nein <i>No</i>
Teacher	muss man nach draußen gehen, ne? <i>One has to go outside, right?</i>
Child 4	aber in der Wohnung kann man das machen <i>But in the flat one can also do it</i>
Child 4	ein Fenster aufmachen, und; und dann kann man den auch steigen lassen. <i>Open the window, and; and then one can also fly it</i>
Teacher	wenn man am Fenster steht, dass der Drachen nach draußen kommt? ((blickt zu C4)) <i>When one stands at the window, the kite gets out? ((gaze directed towards C4))</i>
Child 4	ja <i>Yes</i>

(Excerpt 19, Transcript 5, Case 5)

Excerpt 19 shows an instance of a series of discussions related to general knowledge matters, i.e. flying a kite. In this interaction sequence, the teacher allowed the child to demonstrate his knowledge first and then provided immediate feedback in the form of confirmation and elaboration. The cognitive level of both the teacher's instructional strategies and the child's responses could be regarded as high. In addition, the elaborated and complex sentence structure as well as the discourse mode of explaining reflected the use of "text-to-life" decontextualized language utterances.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, the findings of this study pinpointed the benefits of having group interaction during dialogic book reading activities, which can be considered a potential language learning context for preschool children. Dialogic book reading in itself stresses very strongly the interaction between adult and child, in which the child should be supported to take a more active role as a storyteller (Whitehurst, 1992; Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). Another result of this study indicated that when this type of book reading activity was done in a small group context, there were also occurrences of advantageous peer interaction, in which children interacted among themselves.

The teachers' instructional strategies – including prompting, correcting and modelling – during group interaction were found to be a potential facilitating context for preschool children's learning of vocabulary and grammar. In addition, the utilisation of high level cognitive and decontextualized language (see Quasthoff & Wild, 2014–in this issue, for the role of academic language in educational success) by the teachers could trigger responses at similar levels by the children, even though they were still in the process of acquiring the language as their second language. These findings, then, would seem to imply that teachers need to be aware of how to apply appropriate instructional strategies to support children's learning, especially in the context of group interaction during book reading activities.

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