



# 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

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