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ABSTRACT

A study examined young children's emergent reading abilities through analysis of their assisted storybook interactions. Twelve storybooks were read to 41 preschool children during a two-week period preceding interviews. During the interviews, each child was asked to "read" a favorite storybook aloud to a stuffed animal and to the examiner. In 11 cases in which the child did not respond to this initial prompt, additional encouragements were given by the examiner, including reading the story aloud with the child. The videotaped interviews were examined for features thought to be related to knowledge about written language and reading. Preliminary analysis of the assisted storybook interactions indicated a variety of responses. Some children responded only nonverbally, for example, by pointing to the picture. In contrast, other children became very involved verbally, recreating the story with adult assistance. Storybook interactions also varied in the type of language the children used. The responses of some children reflected oral language, containing conversational characteristics, while others resembled written language and contained fragments of the exact wording of the text. During further analysis of the assisted storybook interactions, responses appeared to fall into five categories: nonverbal, conversational, semantically equivalent, echo-like, and verbatim-like. (Examples of interactions are included in the text.) (HTH)

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"Let's Read Together": Young Children's Assisted Storybook Interactions

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"Let's read together" is a phrase often heard in young children's early encounters with storybooks. 'Reading together' adults and children share storybooks before bedtime or at various times during the day. The purpose of this paper is to describe young children's emergent reading abilities through analysis of their assisted storybook interactions in a research setting.

The acquisition of literacy has been recently described within a developmental perspective. Knowledges about written language and reading are thought to begin to develop during the years prior to formal instruction (Doake, 1981; Rossman,

1980; Schickedanz, 1978; Sulzby, 1982a; Teale, 1982). Development occurs within a social context. The social interaction theory of Vygotsky (1978) provides a theoretical basis for the highly interactive nature of development. Vygotsky proposed that every function in the child's cultural development appears first on the interpsychological level and then later on the intrapsychological level. According to Vygotsky's social interaction theory, literacy would begin at the interpsychological level of functioning when adult and child interact with each other and some form of written language. Through continued experiences the child would gradually internalize the processes necessary for independent reading.

The relevance of Vygotsky's social interaction theory to the acquisition of literacy has been supported by Teale (1982) and Taylor (1980). Teale (1982) described the young child's literacy environment as being constructed by the interactions between the child and those persons around him/her. The beginning stages of literacy interactions are thought to be interpsychologically constructed.

Taylor (1980) described the social context of learning to read and write within the family. The mediation of the literacy event provided by the adult (or older sibling) was described as being on the level of interpsychological functioning.

Vygotsky (1978) used the term "zone of proximal development" to describe differences in the child's performance

when working with an adult and when working alone. In situations where the child and adult are involved in task completion the child is thought to be using abilities and knowledges that are in the process of development but that do not yet function on an independent level. Thus, examining instances of assisted reading may be a fruitful way of looking at the early development of knowledges about reading and written language within the child's zone of proximal development.

The acquisition of literacy has been described as involving a complex transition from oral to written language (Sulzby, 1982b, 1983). Research by Sulzby (1982b, 1983) described the type of language used by children when interacting independently with a storybook; such language may have oral language-like and/or written language-like characteristics. Oral-like language is that typically used in face-to-face conversation. It is highly interactive and depends upon the present context for comprehension of the message. Written-like language is that typically found in printed text. It is primarily decontextualized (Olson, 1977) and its comprehension does not depend upon the immediate context.

Analysis of assisted storybook interactions in terms of the type of language used by the child has the potential to further the examination of children's emergent reading abilities. The research described herein focuses on the assisted storybook interactions of young children and is part of a larger study in which independent storybook interactions were elicited.

Method

Subjects

The children included in the study were enrolled in a day care center in a northwestern suburb of Chicago. Twenty-four children (mean age 4-1, range 2-8 to 4-8) took part in a study in May and 17 (mean age 3-7, range 2-5 to 5-2) took part in August. Of those children eleven had assisted storybook interactions. This paper will focus on their assisted storybook interactions. Segments of storybook interactions of five children will be used to illustrate the categories of behavior discussed below.

Materials

For each study books were selected by the investigator to be used by teachers in the classroom. The books were read at group storytime during a two-week period preceding the interviews. The books were also available for the children's individual use during the day for the two-week period. A total of twelve books were introduced to the classroom, six in May and six in August. Among these were five books used previously in studies of emergent reading (Doake, 1981; Haussler, 1982; Holdaway, 1979; Schickedanz, 1981; Sulzby, 1982a). Each book used in the first study was parallel in story content and text style to a book in the second study. Four copies of each book were provided so that each child would have access to one of the books during the individual storytimes that occurred during the day.

Procedures

The storybook interviews took place in a quiet room near the classroom. Before leaving the classroom the child was asked to bring a favorite stuffed animal. The animals were used to provide the children with a familiar object to take to the interview and to help create an 'audience' for the storybook interaction. The interviews were videotaped and audiotaped.

Two books were used for each interview: the book that had been read most frequently at the group storytimes and each child's self-selected favorite. Each child was first asked to "read the book to Snoopy (name of animal) and me (the examiner)." In cases in which the child did not respond to this initial prompt, four additional encouragements could be given. The final encouragement involved the greatest amount of assistance: "Let's read it together." The story was then read by the examiner at a moderately slow pace, with pauses at points judged to allow for prediction.

Subsequent behaviors by the examiner were determined by the child's on-going responses to the reading of the story, including page turning. During the assisted reading the examiner occasionally used questioning and commenting in an attempt to stimulate the child's response to the book. The questions and comments were designed to avoid introducing story content not previously mentioned.

Transcription of Video and Audio Tapes

Each child's storybook interview was transcribed by two assistants. Transcriptions included the child's verbal

behavior, the examiner's verbal behavior, and selected non-verbal behaviors. The selected non-verbal behaviors included page turning, pointing, and line of gaze.

Analysis of Assisted Storybook Interactions

The assisted storybook interactions were examined for features thought to be related to knowledges about written language and reading. The focus of this analysis was on the type of language found in the children's responses. 'Type of language' refers to the oral-like or written-like character of the child's verbal response.

Results

Preliminary analysis of the assisted storybook interactions indicated a variety of responses. Some children responded only non-verbally, e.g. pointing to the picture. In contrast other children became very involved verbally in re-creating the story with adult assistance. Storybook interactions also varied in the type of language used by the children. The responses of some children were oral language-like, containing dialogic or conversational characteristics. Other children's responses were written language-like and contained fragments of the exact wording of the text.

Categories of Response

During further analysis of the assisted storybook interactions responses appeared to fall into five categories. Each category is described below.

Non-verbal response. In this type of storybook interaction the child responded non-verbally to the examiner's

pauses, e.g. pointing to the picture. If a text or story-related question was asked the child sometimes responded with a shake or a nod of the head.

For example, in the segment below Joy (age 3-2) responded to the text pause by pointing to the illustration of the monster, but made no verbal response.

Interaction		Text: Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak)
Child:	(looking at adult)	(page 15)
Adult:	and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the (pause)	and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are.
Child:	(looks at picture and moves a little, but does not turn page though pause is long. Then child points to a monster in the illustration.)	
Adult:	wild things are.	
Child:	(turns to page 17)	

Conversational response. In this category a verbal turn-taking occurred between the child and examiner that had dialogic qualities. There were two levels of response in this category. At the low level the child responded to the text pauses with a comment or question about the immediate interview context, which may or may not have been related to the storybook. The following example of Patrick's (age 2-8) interaction illustrates this lower level of the conversational response category.

Interaction		Text: Are You My Mother? (Eastman)
Adult:	The kitten just looked and looked. It did not say (pause)	(page 23) The kitten just looked and looked. It did not say a thing.
Child:	bear (starts to play with bear's nose again)	
Adult:	a thing.	
Child:	This little bear (squeezes bear's nose)	
Adult:	Um-hmm. This little bear is listening to your story that you're reading out of the book.	
Child:	There's a rock in there. (still touching bear's nose)	
Adult:	Could be.	
Child:	There's a rock in there. (touching bear's eye)	
Adult:	Could be. (long pause) Let's go on with our story.	
Child:	(nods)	

In Patrick's storybook interaction he appeared to be concerned with the immediate context (i.e. his audience) rather than with re-creating the story line or story text. At the higher level of this category the interaction also had conversational qualities, however, the child took the lead in interacting with the book and structured a dialogue

about the story rather than creating a story 'text' (c.f. Sulzby & Otto, 1982). The higher level of the conversational category is illustrated in the segment below of Jack's (age 4-2) interaction.

Interaction		Text: Are You My Mother? (Eastman)
Child:	Hey, you know (turns to pages 48-49) Hey, you know what the little bird said?	(pages 48-49) But the big thing just said, "Snort." "Oh, you are not my mother," said the baby bird. "You are a Snort. I have to get out of here!"
Adult:	(pause) What?	
Child:	Said, "Are you my mother?"	
Adult:	(chuckles) He did?	
Child:	Yeah. Except it didn't say anything. (looks at adult) You know what it said? It said, "Snort." (still looking at adult)	
Adult:	(laughs)	
Child:	Is that a Snort I think? (points to steam shovel in picture, looks at adult)	
Adult:	Is it?	
Child:	(turns to pages 50-51) Yeah. (begins to turn page, then goes back to pages 50-51) Hey, there door on the bottom. (points to picture on page 50)	(pages 50-51) But the baby bird could not get away. The Snort went up. It went way, way up. And up, up, up went the baby bird.

In the above segment Jack asked a question about the story or text and then provided the answer himself. This question-answer pattern was repeated throughout his story-book interaction. At the end of this segment Jack referred to the content of the illustration which was not part of the original text.

Semantically-equivalent response. Verbal responses in this category reflected the storyline or pictured action but did not reproduce the actual language of the text. In Cindy's (age 4-4) segment below her responses reflected story knowledge as well as an awareness that the story text contained repetition.

Interaction		Text: The Carrot Seed (Krauss)
Adult:	His father said, (pause) I'm afraid (pause)	(pages 6-7) His father said, "I'm afraid it won't come up."
Child:	(looking at adult) Nothing's coming up.	
Adult:	And his big brother said (pause)	(pages 8-9) And his big brother said, "It won't come up."
Child:	Nothing's coming up. (smiling at adult as she speaks)	

Echo-like response. Some of the children repeated what the examiner had just read. In the example below Roy's (age 4-6) echo-like responses vary in length as the length of what the adult reads is varied, i.e. from six words to three words to one word echo responses.

Interaction		Text: Are You My Mother? (Eastman)
Adult:	The kitten was not his mother (pause)	(page 24) The kitten was not his mother, so he went on.
Child:	The kitten was not his mother	
Adult:	so he went (pause)	
Child:	so he went	
Adult:	on. (pause)	
Child:	on.	

Verbatim-like response. In this category are responses that contained fragments of the original text. The example of Dennis' (age 3-11) interaction contains instances where the child gave verbatim-like responses to the pauses in text. Not all of the pauses in the text were responded to, however, where a response occurred it had verbatim-like characteristics.

Interaction		Text: Are You My Mother? (Eastman)
Adult:	How could I (pause)	(page 33) "How could I be your mother?" said the cow. "I am a cow."
Child:	be your mother?	
Adult:	(pause) said the cow. I am (pause)	
Child:	the cow. (turns to pages 34-35)	
Adult:	The kitten (pause) and the hen (pause) were not (pause)	(pages 34-35) The kitten and the hen were not his mother.
Child:	his moth'r.	
Adult:	The dog (pause) and the (pause)	The dog and the cow were not his mother.
Child:	cow (short pause) were not his mother.	

While there seems to be tentative evidence that these five categories of response relate to differences in oral and written language, further analysis and investigation are necessary. We are not ready yet to draw strong conclusions from the present evidence. Further analysis and investigation are currently in progress.

Implications for Future Research

Several questions remain regarding the relationship of children's assisted storybook interactions to emergent reading ability. First, what relationships do children discover between oral and written language? Second, are there additional categories of response that were not represented by the data in this study? A longitudinal study in which children's assisted storybook interactions are followed would be appropriate. Potentially, such a study would aid in clarifying the validity of the categories described here as well as the relationship between the various categories.

A third question concerns the nature of the relationship between assisted storybook interactions and independent storybook interactions. Again, a longitudinal study would be valuable. Such research would explain further the transition from interpsychological functioning to intrapsychological functioning in the acquisition of literacy.

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