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Word explanation and content expansion during storybook reading: relation to SES and children's language

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ABSTRACT

We examined the relation between mothers' word explanation and story content expansion during shared book reading, family socio-economic status (SES) and children's language. The participants included 90 mothers and their children (aged 5–6 years) from low and middle SES. Mother–child storybook reading was videotaped, and the child's vocabulary, storytelling and phonological awareness were tested. Results show that the mothers explained about one word during the book reading across SES, whereas story content expansion was more frequent. Children's language and mothers' story content expansion were correlated positively with SES, but mothers' frequency of word explanation and manner of explanations were not correlated with SES, except for provision of word meaning, which correlated negatively with SES. Story content expansion was related to the children's vocabulary level, whereas discussing story illustrations was negatively related to the children's vocabulary. The limited word explanation support by mothers in shared book reading and its implications are discussed.

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Young children; children's language; book reading; SES

Book reading to young children is regarded as a promising context for rich vocabulary and story comprehension that in turn serve as a good support for future reading comprehension (Bus, van IJzen-doorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Lennox, 2013). Although this activity is well documented in the literature, there is still a need to learn more about its nature in the family context, its relation to parents' socio-economic status (SES) and child development.

Many storybooks for children have a classical structure, which presents a schema of exposition, a problem and resolutions (Mandler & Johnson, 1977) and also involves a written register using infrequent words which are not part of everyday speech (Evans, Reynolds, Shaw, & Pursoo, 2011). This challenging context may serve as a good basis for story comprehension and vocabulary enrichment for young children. Indeed, studies on book reading showed that parents not only paraphrase the story text to their children, but also use elaborations or 'distancing talk' strategies (Sigel, 1982) aiming to support children's understanding beyond the written text. However, there is little information on how frequently parents use the storybook reading context for vocabulary enrichment in everyday life, and how parents behave in such interaction processes. Furthermore, there is almost no research on these questions with reference to family SES and children's language level. This research focused on this topic. We view this type of in-depth study on the nature of the shared book-reading activity as a source for future family intervention programmes, in order to maximize children's language and literacy growth.

Book reading and vocabulary learning

Early childhood is considered to be a crucial period for children's vocabulary development (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Marulis & Neuman, 2010) and this development is important for reading, reading comprehension and school success (Verhoeven & Perfetti, 2011). For many years, exposure to book reading was thought to be the best way to ensure vocabulary enrichment (Stanovich, 1986). Reading more books was reported as being correlated with a rich vocabulary and text comprehension (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991; Nation, 2015). Furthermore, young children learn more novel words from shared storybook reading, when the same books are read to them repeatedly, than when being read from different storybooks (Horst, Parsons, & Bryan, 2011). However, the notion that just repeated reading by itself is sufficient for word meaning learning was not fully supported in all studies. For example, Schatz and Baldwin (1986) found that the reading context alone did not support children's learning of the meaning of low-frequency words. Children demonstrated confusion regarding the correct identification of new word explanations. According to Swanborn and Gloppe (1999), the ability to learn words from context depends on the learners' ability, their grade level and the text density. They found that children with a lower level of language do not learn much from indirect teaching. These studies have shown that although words may be learned from the context, this learning is usually less effective. Contexts can be complicated and may not contain appropriate information for deriving word explanations. These findings led to a direct approach of vocabulary teaching (see McKeown & Beck, 2004). The idea is that multiple exposures are not enough for learning new words and planned instructional interventions are required.

Adult-child support occurs in different activities and contexts, and storybook reading is an important one (Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996). This activity usually exposes young children to the written register, including a rich vocabulary to which children are not exposed in the oral language of everyday life (Evans et al., 2011). Shared storybook reading is a familial activity, which occurs between parents and children more often than the reading of other genres of books (e.g. alphabet or song books) (De Temple & Snow, 1996; Goodist, Raitan, & Perlmutter, 1988). Although this activity was highly researched, and although children's books contain relatively more rare and sophisticated words that are unfamiliar to young children (compared to oral conversation) (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988), the questions of how frequently parents explain these words and how much this comprises part of the 'distancing' discourse were rarely researched.

The literature about the relation between book reading by parents and young children's vocabulary knowledge is based mainly on experimental studies which examined the impact of adult-child (teacher, parent or experimenter) book reading on children's vocabulary (Horst, 2013; Horst et al., 2011; Wasik & Hindman, 2014). For example, Collins (2005) examined 4–5 ESL (English second language) children's words learning following a parent-child reading intervention programme. The parents read two books to their children. Each book was read three times over the course of 3 weeks, and the parents provided explanations for the new words during reading. Explanations included pointing to book illustrations, providing short definitions, using synonyms, gestures and expanding the word meaning by using the word in a sentence that is different from that which appears in the book. In the control group, the book was read to the children without any parental guidance. The results showed that the children in the experimental group outperformed the children in the control group and exhibited a higher level of receptive knowledge of the target words.

Researches on 'natural' everyday storybook reading, including frequency and way of word meaning support, are scant (see, e.g. Debaryshe, 1993; Dexter & Stacks, 2014). These studies are important, since they can tell us how parents behave 'naturally' in an everyday story reading activity, and what are the relations between these ongoing behaviours at home and children's development. Such data may help elucidate parents' behaviour in this type of event and help us suggest adequate interventions for future family literacy programmes. Such a 'natural' study was performed by Dexter and Stacks (2014). This study focused on naturalistic observations of shared reading practices among

low SES (LSES) families, learning the relations between parental behaviour and their children's (1;5–3;5 years old) language skills, including vocabulary. Their analysis focused on parents drawing their children's attention to the text and providing them with word meanings. The results showed that parents' behaviour predicted children's receptive language skills. Other studies that dealt with this topic were performed in Canadian families by Evans and her colleagues (2011). They conducted two studies on how parents relate to new words during shared storybook reading with their children. The first study was longitudinal, and examined the parent–child reading activity from kindergarten to the second grade. In this research, they examined how parents related to new words when their children were asked to read from a book. The most prominent finding was that most of the new words that parents and children encountered during the reading were not discussed at all. The findings showed that, on average, there was a discussion on one or two words during the reading session of all age groups, from kindergarten to the second grade. Furthermore, the most common manner of referring to new words was repeating the words. Evans et al.'s (2011) second study focused on parents of first graders who read a book that included 38 novel words. They found that, on average, parents and children discussed 5% of the new words in the story (2 words). The common strategy used by the parents to explain the words was to provide a general comment, which only transferred part of the word's meaning to the child. For example, for the word 'peek' the parent explained, 'he sneaks around the wall'. Few parents used a synonym or provided a definition. Low-quality encounters of explaining new words during the family storybook reading activity were also reported in a recent research performed in the USA (Hindman, Skibbe, & Foster, 2014). Of 700 parents (most of them mothers), only 14% reported that they discuss vocabulary while reading to their 4-year-old child. Since book reading is common in many homes and considered as an optimal context for promoting children's vocabulary, we aimed to elucidate these relations in the present study.

Book reading and phonological awareness

Vocabulary acquisition in the early years includes receptive and expressive word learning. This process may involve phonological awareness to the word's sounds, which is required later for the reading and writing process. According to the lexical restriction hypothesis, as the lexicon of the child increases, a finer phonemic distinction takes place to adapt to this increase (Metsala & Walley, 1998). This means that lexical representations are at first more holistic, and become more refined and specific with time. Thus, children with a large vocabulary usually also have better phonological awareness for word forms (Katz, 1986; Snowling, Wagtendonck, & Stafford, 1988). Studies show correlations between vocabulary knowledge, phonological awareness and early literacy level (Garlock, Walley, & Metsala, 2001; Metsala, 1997). It is possible that story reading may support not only word explanation learning, but also children's phonological awareness. Furthermore, there is some evidence that parents sometimes include phonological awareness activities with their young children during book reading, helping their children identify specific sounds in words, or paying attention to letters representing the sounds in words (Korat, Klein, & Drori-Segal, 2007; Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1988). There is evidence that children who were read to frequently at an early age by their parents have higher scores in phonological awareness tests (Evans, Shaw, Bell, Moretti, & Fox, 2002). Several intervention studies have examined the effect of the adult–child joint book-reading activity on promoting children's phonological awareness (Lefebvre, Trudeau, & Sutton, 2011). However, only few studies examined whether an everyday shared book-reading activity in the natural environment (without intervention) supports children's phonological awareness. This issue was examined in the present study.

Book reading and children's story retelling

The ability to retell a story at a young age is regarded as another language skill that might predict academic and literacy success (Snow & Dickinson, 1990). Story retelling in 4-year-old children was

reported by Paul and Smith (1993) as one of the best predictors of school success for children who were defined as being at risk for literacy acquisition. Retelling a story requires cognitive, linguistic and narrative knowledge skills constructed in a coherent manner (McCabe & Bliss, 2003). Participating in storybook reading, and the discourse which parents bring to it, might teach young children to be aware of different aspects of the story, including its language and structure, and how to use them when retelling the story (Sulzby, 1985). Studies showed that high-quality parent–child book reading contributed to children’s story retelling abilities (Lever & Sénéchal, 2011; Reese, Leyva, Sparks, & Grolnick, 2010). These studies examined various measures of story retelling, including language complexity and story structure (e.g. introduction, characters, temporal terms, casual terms and cohesion). Most of these studies were intervention programmes. In the current study, we examined whether a mother–child book-reading activity in the natural environment (without intervention) can contribute to children’s story retelling skills.

Book reading and story content expansion

Studies on storybook reading showed that parents use story content elaborations or ‘distancing talk’ strategies (Sigel, 1982) aiming to support children’s understanding beyond the written text. ‘Distancing’ was first suggested by Sigel (1982) and refers to the extent to which parents go beyond the information presented in the immediate context in their conversations with their children. The idea of distancing is grounded in a discourse-oriented theoretical framework and captures the different levels of cognitive challenge parents present through conversations with their young children. High-level distancing characterizes parent behaviour that goes beyond the immediate information on children’s immediate knowledge (e.g. by using inferences, predictions, etc.). A medium level of distancing refers to parents’ discussions of issues restricted to children’s current knowledge about the world. Low-level distancing refers to parents’ discussions that are confined to specific issues or objects and which focuses less on general knowledge. The importance of shared book reading in the family context as a mediation for children’s literacy development and its relation to SES are well documented (e.g. Bus et al., 1995; Snow & Ninio, 1986). However, it is interesting to study the extent to which parents relate to vocabulary explanations compared to text content distancing.

Book reading in different SES

The importance of investigating how LSES parents behave towards their children in the shared reading event stems from the compelling evidence that LSES children are at greater risk for poor development of literacy competencies and for school failure as a result of the literacy practices in their homes, compared to children from middle SES (MSES) families (Adams, 1990; Phillips & Lonigan, 2009). The relationship between shared book-reading activities and children’s family SES has been researched extensively in the last decades (e.g. Bus, Leseman, & Keultjes, 2000; De Temple & Snow, 1996; Mol & Neuman, 2014). For example, the Korat et al. (2007) found that Israeli LSES mothers engaged more in labelling and describing pictures in shared book reading than MSES mothers, who used ‘distancing’ talk (Sigel, 1982), a higher level of talk relating to the children’s own experience, making inferences from text meaning to other issues and evaluating what was read. Similarly, De Temple and Snow (1996) found that more than 80% of the talk of less educated mothers with their young children during a book-reading event was related only to ‘concrete immediately available information’ (p. 54). On the other hand, researchers who focused on the book-reading activities of more educated mothers with their young children reported that these mothers included more distancing talk or non-immediate talk (Wheeler, 1983). Thus, while we have data on the higher support of MSES compared to LSES mothers on story content, the question of the extent to which MSES parents support their children’s new words learning in storybook reading events compared to LSES parents has not been investigated to date.

Parents' behaviour and responses to their children are culturally embedded (Tamis-LeMonda, Kuchirko, & Song, 2014) and are beyond family SES. This study focused on storybook reading of parents to their young children in Israeli Hebrew-speaking Jewish families from different SES neighbourhoods. In Israel, a LSES typically characterizes the Jewish population of Middle Eastern and North African origin and a MSES characterizes those of European origin (Cohen, 1999; Smooha & Kraus, 1986). Although book reading in Israeli society is regarded as an appreciated activity for parents with their young children across SESs, there are differences between SES groups in the home literacy environment, including the number of children's books, frequency of parent-child reading and quality of parent-child reading, favouring MSES compared to LSES (Korat et al., 2007). Reading books to young children became more and more common in the LSES families over the past 30 years. For example, Feitelson and Goldstein (1986) found an average of 4 children's books in LSES homes that they visited in the 1980s, while at the beginning of the 2000s, we found 51 books in these families compared to 80 in MSES homes (Korat, 2002). Furthermore, LSES parents reported on reading to their children once a week, while MSES reported on two to three times a week (Korat et al., 2007). Although large differences in the family literacy environment (number of books and frequency of reading) still exist between low and middle SES groups, it seems that LSES parents are becoming more aware of the importance of book reading to young children (Haglili, 2005).

In conclusion, although children's books have words that are unfamiliar to young children (Evans et al., 2011), the question of how frequently parents explain these words, and how much this is part of their 'distancing talk', was rarely researched. A few studies that used an experimental intervention design showed that supporting parents in how to read to young children contributed to the children's language learning (Ewers & Brownson, 1999; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; Sénéchal, 1997). However, only limited research is available on the nature of the parent-child book-reading activity in the natural environment of the home (without any guided intervention) (Evans et al., 2011; Tabors, Beals, & Weizman, 2001). No study is available on the contribution of such activities to children's language. These questions were also not addressed with reference to different communities (low and middle SES).

In the present study, we therefore asked how frequently mothers of kindergarten children (a) explain new words, and (b) expand the story content to their children in a shared book-reading activity. We further asked: (c) How is the expansion performed? (d) Is the mothers' support of word meaning and story comprehension related to the children's language level? (e) How are the questions related to family SES? These questions are important for understanding the nature of this activity in everyday life, and might serve as evidence-based knowledge for future interventions aiming at supporting children's language.

Methods

Participants

The database we used included 90 pairs of mothers and their kindergarten children aged 5–6 years. We focused on mothers because of their availability and greater consent to participate in the study compared to fathers. The children were recruited from 40 kindergartens: 20 located in LSES and 20 in MSES neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods were randomly chosen from the list of the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (2009). The children were from Jewish Hebrew-speaking homes. They were solicited by letters sent to their parents. New immigrants and children with language and learning disabilities were excluded. A similar response rate was found for the MSES (9%) and LSES (8.7%) families. A seven-factor index was used to calculate the families' SES levels. This index took into account the father's and the mother's education level, profession and occupation and the family's income level. We added the fathers' and mothers' profession and the family income level (see Duncan & Magnuson, 2003) to the well-known Hollingshead (1975) index. These measures seemed important to us since

Table 1. Demographic characteristics ($N = 90$).

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Education level		
Mothers	3.23	(1.24)
Fathers	2.82	(1.27)
Professional level		
Mothers	3.98	(1.21)
Fathers	3.86	(1.18)
Occupational level		
Mothers	3.70	(1.43)
Fathers	3.72	(1.27)
Family income level ^a	3.19	(1.00)

^aRange = 1–5.

many parents in Israel do not work in the profession for which they were trained. Family income appears to be another important measure in the general picture of SES in Israel (Korat et al., 2007). The data provided by the mothers about education, profession and occupation were transformed to a 5-point scale (from 1 = low to 5 = high). The parents' education scale ranged from 1 (6 or less years of school) to 5 (20 or more years of school). The professional qualification and current occupation scale ranged from 1 (unskilled workers and menial industrial labourers) to 5 (higher executives and major professionals). The family's income level was based on the mother's ranking of the family income compared to the established average in Israel during the research period (this information was given to the mothers). The mothers' rankings ranged from 1 (much below the national average) to 5 (much above the national average). A *Z* score was used to calculate the mean for the SES variable (range 1–5; $\alpha = .90$). All families in both groups were intact. All children studied in the regular education system. Reading and writing are not taught formally in kindergartens. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the families that participated in the study.

Research tools

The reading book

We used the book 'Frog on a Very Special Day' by Velthuijs (2000) in the study. This book was chosen after a comprehensive check, which revealed that it is unknown to parents and kindergarten teachers. Using an unfamiliar book was performed in order to control prior acquaintance of the parents and children with the book. The story has a classic structure, which includes exposition, characters presentation, a problem and a solution (Mandler & Johnson, 1977). The book discusses the problem of a friendship. It tells about a frog who feels abandoned by his friends, and is frustrated since he cannot find out why it is a very special day. At the end of the story, he discovers that his friends prepared a surprise party for his birthday, and they reveal to him why this is a very special day. The book includes 22 pages of text and illustrations. Four kindergarten teachers evaluated the book's language and pointed out the possible new words for children aged 5–6 years. Seven new words were identified, with 95% agreement. These words were defined as target words, which were suggested to be interpreted to the child. The words are pondered [in Hebrew *Hirher*], grumbling [in Hebrew *Roten*], dispirited [in Hebrew *Meyohash*], flowed [in Hebrew *Zalgu*], sobbing [in Hebrew *Hityapehach*], describe [in Hebrew *Te'aer*] and special [in Hebrew *Meyuhad*]. All the words except one ('special') were verbs. We assume that verbs (compared to nouns) were chosen since they are considered more difficult than the nouns in the story (Berman, 1999).

Mother-child interaction in storybook reading

The mother's reading to her child was recorded on video at the family home, in a place declared by the mother and the child as comfortable for them. The book was given to the mother, and she was

Table 2. Examples of mothers' support levels in the book-reading activity.

Category level	Example 1	Example 2
1. Relating to illustration	M: (reads) Instead, he found a note on the door. M: (Points at the illustration) M: This is the note.	M: Do you see the pants? M: (points to the illustration) M: What do they have there that looks so funny? C: Stripes. M: That's right, they are with stripes.
2. Promoting text comprehension via paraphrasing	M: (reads) Wait a minute, today is Wednesday ... no Tuesday. M: (reads) Today is the day. M: They are trying to find out what day it is, but nobody knows. M: She says that today is Wednesday or Tuesday. M: And he is thinking.	M: (reads) And what special day is it, anyway, ponders the frog to himself. M: Do you know what ponder is? C: No ... (nods his head) ... M: Thought.
3. Promoting text comprehension via distancing	M: (reads) He started waving up and down with a lot of effort. M: What do you think will happen? Will he succeed to fly? C: No, he cannot fly. He is a frog. M: That's right, frogs do not fly. Now, let's read and see what happens.	M: (reads) The frog felt nauseous. M: What usually makes a person feel nauseous? C: When you are sick.

Note: Level 1 = lowest; Level 3 = highest.

asked to read it to her child as she usually reads to him or her. In the next stage, the videotapes were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts included the mother's and child's statements and behaviours. Transcripts and videos were used as a source for analysing the mother's support in the interaction and all the mothers' additions to the text were analysed. The interaction was segmented into verbal units (see examples in Table 2). Verbal units constitute the smallest unit of meaning and usually comprised sentences. Single or multiple verbal units may be found within a speaking turn. This method has been used previously by Bus et al. (2000) (see also Diamond, 1996; Schiffrin, 1987) and was coded only when a new subject was added to the previous discourse. A repetition of content or comments was not coded as new content.

Mothers' support of word meaning

The mothers' word explanations were divided into two categories: (a) 'Providing' word explanation and (2) 'Demanding' word explanation. 'Providing' was related to cases in which the mothers gave the explanation of a word; 'demanding' was when the mothers asked their children about the explanation of the word. Viewing the video and reading the transcripts repeatedly yielded two modes of word interpretation: (a) use of a synonym or providing an explanation of the word and (b) providing a synonym or explaining the word by integrating a context appropriate for the story content. A similar suggestion for explanations appeared in Biemiller's (2004) research.

Mothers' support of story content

The mothers' support of the story content was classified into three levels, from low (1) to high (3), as follows: (1) relating to illustrations in the book (e.g. naming characters and objects in the illustrations, referring to the relationship between the text and the illustrations, or naming details in the illustrations that were not mentioned in the story); (2) paraphrasing the text, namely telling the text in an oral language (compared to reading the written text); (3) promoting text comprehension via 'distancing' (e.g. relating to the possible next story event, relating to the child's own relevant experiences, relating to feelings or thoughts of the story's characters, etc.). The hierarchy of the levels was determined by 'moving from concrete immediately available information' (De Temple & Snow,

1996, p. 54) to higher cognitive or abstraction processes, termed by Sigel (1982) as 'distancing'. Level 1, merely relating to the drawings of the book alone, seemed to us to indicate a lower level than Level 2, dealing with text comprehension by discussing the written text, by simply paraphrasing it or by giving explanations for a word. Level 3, dealing with text comprehension by enriching it with the child's own experiences or by relating it to a more general concept, seemed to us to indicate an even higher level.

To support the construct validity of these three maternal mediation levels underlying this scale, three independent judges read the introduction to the scale and the description of the levels with their examples. The judges were chosen because they are professionals in educational research and the practice of literacy in Israel. They were asked to order the levels, presented in random order without any identification, from the lowest to the highest. The question they were posed was: 'What type of mediation might better promote children's cognitive and literacy development?' All three judges independently ordered the three levels according to the order presented above. The analysis of topic units in this paper was restricted only to those which account for at least 2% of all content units. Furthermore, references to procedures of book reading (e.g. 'Let me turn the page') or to conduct issues (e.g. 'Sit properly') were not coded for this analysis. Table 2 presents examples of mothers' support in the book-reading activity.

This classification is based on a similar tool which was developed by Bus et al. (2000), with some elaboration by Korat (2009). The mothers' expansion level was coded separately by two graduate students who worked randomly on 20% ($n = 18$) of the transcripts. Inter-judge reliability of the expansion level scale coding was Kappa = .85.

Children's language level

Vocabulary

We used the Hebrew version of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT; Solberg & Nevo, 1979). The examiner told the child one word at a time, and showed him or her a series of four pictures. The child was asked to point to one image from the four pictures that best described the word said by the examiner. We used a standardized score, using the average and standard deviation of all the participants. The test included 110 items and the score range was 81–113. The scores were transferred to a scale of 1–100, with an average test score of $M = 47.75$, $SD = 4.25$.

Story retelling

We used Sulzby (1985) test which presents a developmental model of young children pretending to read a book. The model introduces several developmental transitions, where the main one is from using spoken language with reference to the pictures in the book to using the book's language according to the written text. The model has four stages: (1) an unformatted story which is guided by the book's pictures and is told in the spoken language, (2) a formatted story which is guided by the book's pictures and is told in the spoken language, (3) a formatted story which is guided by the book's pictures and is told in a language which is similar to the written text and (4) reading the story according to the formal print. The child's reading was recorded on tape. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and were used to determine the child's development level scale. The scores (1–4) were transformed to a scale of 1–100. Inter-judge reliability of this instrument was conducted by two graduate students for 10% ($n = 9$) of the transcripts and yielded a Kappa = .87.

Phonological awareness

We used the phonological awareness test of Aram (1998). This test checks the child's ability to distinguish between the smallest phonic units that make up the spoken word. The test allows the evaluation of the child's ability to recognize similar or different sounds at the beginning or the end of the word. A child's level in this test in kindergarten was found to predict linguistic and literacy abilities in the second grade (Aram & Levin, 2003). The test includes two parts, where each has 20 items: in the

first part, the child was asked to compare the opening sound of 20 pairs of one-syllable words. The child was asked to say whether the two words begin with the same sound. In the second part, the child was asked to compare the closing sound of 20 pairs of one-syllable words. The pairs were created based on four categories, where each included five pairs of words: (a) identical consonant and vowel (e.g. elephant-missile [in Hebrew *Pil-Til*]), (b) different consonant and the same vowel (e.g. blood-wild [in Hebrew *Dam-Bar*]), (c) the same consonant and different vowel (e.g. daughter-stamp [in Hebrew *Bat-Bul*]) and (d) different consonant and vowel (e.g. fabric-fire [in Hebrew *Bad-Esh*]). These categories were designed to test the children's ability to distinguish a single syllable and a phoneme. The score range for each part of the test is 0–20. The total score range is 0–40. The components' test scores were transferred to a scale of 1–100. The average measurement is $M = 71.81$, $SD = 14.77$. The correlation between the two scores is $r = .56$, $p < .01$ and the measurement reliability is $\alpha = .81$.

Procedure

In the first stage, an observation of the mother–child book reading was conducted. The activity took place in the participants' home. It lasted about 15–20 minutes and was videotaped. In the second stage, the mothers were visited in their homes and were interviewed for collecting demographic information. In the third stage, the child was tested in his/her kindergarten in a separate quiet room. The tests included PPVT, story retelling and phonological awareness. The test duration was 20–30 minutes.

Results

The results part includes (1) frequency of mothers' word explanations and the manner in which they were explained, including correlations with SES, (2) mothers' story content expanding behaviour and its correlations with SES, (3) correlations between the children's language and SES and (4) correlations between mothers' support in book reading and children's language level.

Mothers' word explanations and SES

The analysis showed that 44.40% of the mothers explained new words to their children during the reading. The 44.40% mothers were divided as follows: 31.10% (28) interpreted one word, 11.10% (10) interpreted two words and 2.10% (2) interpreted three words. In other words, more than half of the mothers (55.50%) did not explain any new words to their children during the reading, and most of the mothers who did explain words did so only once.

Table 3 presents data relating to the manner in which the words were explained. This included (1) giving a synonym or explanation to the target word or (2) providing a synonym or word explanation which connected to the story context. The number of mothers who used each type of explanation out of the mothers who gave explanations is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that using a synonym was the most prevalent way by which the mothers explained a new word if an explanation was given (nearly 45%) and fewer mothers (only 13%) provided a

Table 3. Way of word explanation: number of mothers, percentage of mothers and frequency of use ($N = 86$).

Way of use	No. of mothers	% of mothers	Frequency of use
Word explanation only	28	31.10	1
	10	11.10	2
	2	2.20	3
	50	55.50	0
	12	13.30	1
Word explanation with story content use	78	86.70	0

Table 4. Mean of frequency (and SD) of the way of word explanation and correlation with SES ($N = 86$).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlation with SES
Word explanation			
Providing	0.31	(0.72)	-.22*
Demanding	0.35	(0.60)	.13
Way of explanation			
Providing word explanation	0.60	(0.77)	-.04
Providing word explanation and using story content	0.13	(0.34)	-.04
Other ^a	0.14	(0.24)	-.03

* $p < .05$ ^aDemanding without any word explanation.

synonym or an explanation integrating the word in a sentence which connected to the story context. These behaviours, which may promote a better understanding of words, appeared among the mothers only once during the reading activity.

Table 4 presents the frequency of word explanations (providing and demanding) and the manner in which the words were explained (a synonym or explanation, or a synonym or explanation together with providing a context appropriate to the story content) and the correlations of these variables to the family SES.

Table 4 shows a particularly low frequency of all the variables. Less than one word was explained by the mothers. Furthermore, the table shows that using a synonym for a new word or providing an explanation was very low, and appeared on average less than once during the book-reading activity. Using a synonym or explanation together with providing information which is suitable to the story context appeared even less. The table also shows no correlation between the mothers' word explanation variables and family SES, except for a significant negative correlation between providing the word explanation and SES. The lower the family SES level, the more did the mothers tend to provide the word meaning.

Expanding the story by mothers and SES

The mothers' story-expanding talk included talk which related to the book illustrations, paraphrasing the text and promoting text comprehension via 'distancing'. The range of expansion units is from 0 to 81 and the mean number is $M = 13.36$ ($SD = 12.59$). The expanding behaviours were classified into three levels: low, medium and high. A low level was when the mothers related to illustrations in the book. This type of expansion received 1 point. A medium level was when the mothers paraphrased the text. This received 2 points. A high level was when the mothers used 'distancing talk'. This received 3 points. The score for each level was transformed to a range of 0–100. The higher the score, the higher the expansion level. Table 5 presents the expansion level scores: means, standard deviations and correlations of these variables with family SES.

Table 5 shows that 'distancing talk', which defines a relatively high support level, was common compared to other types of support, that is, relating to illustrations and paraphrasing the text, which both occurred at a similar rate of less than half the percentage of the 'distancing talk' support. It should be noted that the number of subjects dropped to 86 because four mothers did not perform expansion at all. These findings show that mothers of children aged 5–6 years tend to provide their children with comments beyond the 'here and now' in the storybook reading activity

Table 5. Expanding level and correlation with SES ($N = 86$).

	% <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlation with SES
Relating to illustration	23.54	(25.44)	-.25*
Paraphrasing	22.23	(19.11)	-.15
Distancing	54.23	(26.88)	.34**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

beyond SES, although some of them tend to provide a lower level of support by providing comments on the book's illustrations or paraphrasing the text with their own words.

The results also show a significant positive correlation between the frequency of expansion talk and family SES level and a correlation between mothers' expansion talk and SES. The higher the family's SES, the more the 'distancing talk' was observed. Interestingly, while a high-level distancing talk was correlated positively with SES, a negative correlation appeared between relating to illustrations talk and family SES. The higher the family's SES, the more the mothers tended to refer to issues beyond the story content (distancing talk), and the lower the family's SES, the more the mothers tended to refer to illustrations in the storybook.

Children's language level and SES

Table 6 presents the children's tests scores and their correlations with SES.

According to Table 6, the children generally demonstrated a good level of phonological awareness and PPVT skills, while story retelling skills were lower. Furthermore, the table shows a significant correlation between family SES and children's vocabulary level, and SES was close to significant with the children's phonological awareness. No correlation was found between family SES and children's story retelling skill.

Correlations between mothers' support and children's language level

Table 7 presents the correlations between the mothers' support level of word meaning and of story content expansion and the children's language level.

According to Table 7, no correlation appeared between the frequency of the mothers' word explanations and the manner of this support, the frequency of story content expansion and the children's language level in all three measures. Children's vocabulary level was positively correlated with the mothers' story content expansions beyond the text and negatively correlated with discussing story illustrations. These correlations were significant but low.

Discussion

The main finding of this study is that mothers very rarely explain new words to their kindergarten children during a storybook reading activity. These findings support the limited literature available on this phenomenon and show that it is common among English-speaking families in Canada and the USA (Evans et al., 2011; Hindman et al., 2014), as well as in Hebrew-speaking families in Israel. Similar results appeared among Arabic-speaking families (Massalha, 2014). It turns out that most parents do not take advantage of the reading activity to expand their children's vocabulary, although book reading can provide a good exposure to infrequent words to which children are not exposed in the everyday oral language (Evans et al., 2011; Lennox, 2013). The importance and efficiency of such an activity were reported in previous intervention studies. When educators (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Wasik & Hindman, 2014) and parents (Sénéchal, 1997) were instructed on how to read a book, including supporting children's words learning, a clear contribution to children's language was found. However, the number of new words which should be explained during storybook reading should

Table 6. Child's language level and correlation with SES ($N = 90$).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlation with SES
Vocabulary	98.86	(5.57)	.18*
Story retelling	33.58	(19.82)	.06
Phonological awareness	71.81	(14.77)	.17*

* $p < .05$.

Table 7. Mothers' support and correlations with child's language level ($N = 86$).

		Phonological awareness	Vocabulary	Story retelling
Word explanation	Providing	-.19	-.01	-.21
	Demanding	-.03	.02	.01
	Explanation	-.02	.03	-.08
	Explanation with content	-.18	-.01	-.02
Story content expanding	Frequency	.07	-.01	.14
Story content expanding level	Relating to illustrations	-.12	-.24*	-.14
	Paraphrasing	-.12	.01	-.06
	Distancing	.20	.22*	.17

* $p < .05$.

be considered. Several studies have reported that children learn approximately 3–4 new words during the course of one week via shared storybook reading, regardless of how many new words were introduced (e.g. Brett, Rothlein, & Hurley, 1996). Thus, the task may be too challenging if too many words are introduced at once and this could further decrease children's interest in the stories. Furthermore, with too many new words, children typically exhibit only 20% accuracy (Biemiller & Boote, 2006).

Our findings extend current results that appear in the literature and show that the frequency of this behaviour exists beyond family SES. Parents across SES family level discussed only about one word with their children while reading a book. Interestingly, a negative correlation appeared between providing the word explanation and SES. Namely, the lower the family SES level, the more did the mothers tend to provide the word meaning. The tendency to provide the meaning of new words among less educated mothers can be regarded as a positive supportive activity, perhaps showing the mothers' sensitivity to the low vocabulary knowledge of their children. On the other hand, this correlation can perhaps be interpreted as follows: less educated mothers mainly use the 'providing' support (compared to 'demanding' – asking the child questions) because this is the strategy that they know better or feel more comfortable with. More studies are needed to examine whether this phenomenon is typical to LSES parents and its rationale.

One of the main findings of the present study is that a higher SES, which includes a higher parental education level, did not show higher awareness of using the book-reading activity as an opportunity for vocabulary enrichment. This finding is inconsistent with those of Evans et al. (2011). Although they found a similar amount of support of new word explanations in the book-reading event with young children, their findings showed a positive correlation between the frequency of discussing new words in storybook reading and mothers' education level. According to their findings, educated mothers interpreted more new words to their children than less educated mothers. Our findings show no correlation with SES in general, except for a negative correlation between providing word meaning and the SES level. A possible explanation for the difference between the two studies is that Evans and her colleagues focused solely on mothers from MSES, and the correlation with SES appeared within the educated mothers. It is possible that the big variance within the educated mothers in Evans' study (high school and college compared to those with an MA or PhD degree) led to these differences in discussing new words. In our research, the mothers were from low and middle SES families, and the educational gap between the mothers was very big. Their education ranged from secondary education without a high school diploma to a PhD degree. However, the number of mothers with a very high level of education was smaller than in Evans and her colleagues' (2011) research. This might explain the lack of correlation in general (except for the negative correlation between SES and providing word meaning).

The question is why do parents interpret about one word to their young children during storybook reading? There are several possible explanations for this behaviour. First, parents may not be aware of the importance of children's rich vocabulary. Second, parents may know the importance, but think that the fact that the new word appears in the story is enough, and the child will learn it from the context. Third, parents may perceive vocabulary enrichment as an activity that is too didactic and

should be carried out by educators. Fourth, parents may not want to interrupt the flow of reading the storybook so as to not distract the child from the plot, or they are aware that the child is not interested in these intermissions and act accordingly. Fifth, some parents view the reading activity as an emotional experience which is performed primarily for leisure and bonding, rather than as a cognitive learning activity. Evidence for this claim is found in previous research (see Kassow, 2006) in which parents claimed that a joint book-reading activity should be done primarily for fun and not as a context for teaching and learning.

It should be noted that parents do not explain new words to their children, but tend to expand the story content beyond the narrated text, and do this at a relatively high frequency. If parents do not explain new words in order to avoid story telling interruptions, why do they do it in story content support? Perhaps word explanation is perceived as a less coherent activity with the storybook reading compared to story content expansions. Continued research is recommended to examine parents' beliefs about this behaviour in order to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon.

It was also found that LSES and MSES mothers did not differ in the manner in which they explained the words. While in Evans and her colleagues' (2011) study most parental behaviours were not very effective for promoting word learning, in our research 45% (28% in Evans et al., 2011) used synonyms for explanations and 13% (2% in Evans et al., 2011) provided an explanation including connection to the story content. These differences in results might be explained by the researchers in the two groups using different SES measures. Evans et al. used just education and the current paper used a composite measure including education. These two measures of SES may not be comparable and this may be why the results from the papers differ.

Similarly to the correlation between the frequency of providing word explanations and SES, no correlation was found in our study between family SES and the manner of the explanation. Providing interpretations to new words and relating them to the story content rarely appeared in both SES groups. This finding shows that few mothers from LSES and MSES families are aware of ways which can support word learning and use them in the storybook reading context.

Compared to word meaning explanations, our findings indicate a significant positive correlation between the frequency of the story content expansion and family SES. Similarly to previous literature (Baker, Mackler, Sonnenschein, & Serpell, 2001; Leseman & de Jong, 1998), mothers from MSES tend to discuss the story text more frequently than those from LSES. Furthermore, MSES mothers use discourse which is beyond the story context more frequently than LSES mothers, who rarely use this behaviour. It is also interesting that a negative correlation was found between the mother's SES level and her talk on story illustrations. LSES mothers related more to the illustrations. These findings are similar to previous evidence indicating a correlation between parents' education and their support level during joint reading activities. Educated parents tend to challenge their children with higher cognitive talk in the storybook reading event. This might include elaborating the characters' thoughts and feelings, making connections between the story content and the child's experiences, etc., whereas LSES parents tend to relate more to the 'here and now', describing the story content and the book's illustrations (Baker et al., 2001; De Temple & Snow, 1998; Karther, 2002; Leseman & de Jong, 1998). It is possible that the focus of LSES mothers on illustrations (compared to paraphrasing and distancing) is related to their low literacy levels (Tichnor-Wagner, Garwood, Bratsch-Hines, & Vernon-Feagans, 2016).

The present study's findings indicate a significant correlation between mothers' expansion talk beyond the text and children's vocabulary level. Namely, as the mother used higher cognitive talk, the child showed a larger vocabulary. The child's vocabulary may drive the effect and the mother might be sensitive to the child's vocabulary level and match her expansion talk to the child's level, or the expansion talk beyond the text may drive the effect and the child's vocabulary was larger because the mother used expansion talk beyond the text. Similar findings were reported in previous researches (Hindman et al., 2014; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005). For example, Roberts et al. (2005) reported that mothers' talk with preschool children aged 3–5 years in a storybook reading context was related to the children's vocabulary level. The researchers noted that parents' talk

level related more to the children's language than to the frequency of book reading to the children. It is possible that mothers' expansion talk of the story content contributes to children's vocabulary, although the nature of this process is not so clear from this study. Perhaps mothers' talk, which elaborates the story content and ideas that include new words (or partially known words), may serve as a fruitful way to support children's language growth. This claim requires a deeper examination in further research.

It is important to note that while a correlation was found between mothers' story expansion talk and children's language, no correlations were found between the frequency of expansion talk and its level beyond the text and children's phonological awareness and story retelling. It could be claimed that these linguistic skills require a different type of adult support, which is not given to the child in the 'natural context' of book reading. Special activities are presumably required for promoting these skills. Reinforcement for this claim can be found in an intervention study which examined the effect of the adult-child book-reading activity on children's language (Lefebvre et al., 2011). In the experimental group, the reading included a reference to the story content and activities which focused on phonological awareness, while the control group referred solely to the story content. It was found that children in the experimental group showed significant progress in phonological awareness compared to the control group. These findings show that in order to develop phonological awareness during book reading, there is a need to support these skills during the reading, for example reading stories to children with rhyming and playing with the language while reading. Similarly, if we intend to expand children's ability to produce stories, we need to support these skills deliberately, for example to ask the child to participate in storytelling.

Our study also showed a negative correlation between mothers' talk relating to illustrations in the book and children's vocabulary level. As the mother referred more to the illustrations, the child's vocabulary level was lower, or as the child's vocabulary level was lower, the mother referred more to the illustrations. It should be noted that referring to illustrations, which was common among LSES mothers in this study, is generally more suitable developmentally to children younger than kindergarteners (aged 5–6 years). Furthermore, perhaps referring to illustrations, which includes naming objects and figures, or referring the text to the illustrations is an activity that may, by its nature, not include a high language level (e.g. 'Look this is a butterfly' compared to 'What do you think the child will do next?'). It is also possible that the mothers related to words which were already known to their children and not to more challenging words. These findings support previous evidence showing that LSES mothers offer less cognitively challenging talk than MSES mothers (Hoff, 2003; Leseman & de Jong, 1998).

Similar findings appeared regarding the correlations between mothers' talk on illustrations during the reading session and children's phonological awareness and storytelling. It seems that this type of talk is not connected to these abilities. Naming the illustrations as such cannot apparently be an exercise for developing awareness to the sounds of the word or a practice for developing the story retelling ability, which are more complex tasks. More specific and suitable activities are needed to promote these skills.

No correlations were found between the frequency of mothers providing and demanding word explanations to the children in the book-reading activity and children's language level. A possible explanation for this finding is the low number of these behaviours by the mothers in the reading activity. It is also possible that measuring children's general verbal knowledge by the PPVT test was not efficient for showing the children's words learning. Perhaps using a vocabulary measure, which relates to the target new words in the story, would show a correlation between these variables. For example, when children were provided explanations of new words in a storybook reading activity, they progressed in learning these words (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Brett et al., 1996; Wasik & Hindman, 2014).

One limitation of this study is that data were collected from a single observation. Future studies using repeated observations of reading may validate the current findings, and teach us as well on the effects of number of readings. Furthermore, we are aware of the large standard deviations of the

average mediation variables. This shows a large variation in mothers' behaviour regarding word explanation and story content support among mothers from a wide family SES range. This phenomenon was raised already in the literature relating to parents' interactions with children during the book-reading activity (Hammett, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2003; van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGrath, 1997). Creating a type of parental behaviour rather than using average number is a possible way to meet this challenge in future studies.

Our pedagogical recommendation is to raise parents' and educators' awareness to shared book-reading activity as a suitable context for enriching young children's vocabulary.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

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