

DIRECT VOCABULARY TEACHING PRACTICES BY PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate preschool teachers' practices. The sample consisted of 274 preschool teachers working in different regions of Crete in Greece. The data were collected via an online questionnaire comprised of 22 items inquiring about the sample teachers' demographic characteristics and occupational status, as well as about the activity settings and the techniques they use to teach vocabulary directly in their classrooms. In relation to the indicated activity settings and the direct vocabulary teaching techniques, the sample teachers recorded the frequency of their use on 5-point Likert scales. The results showed that story reading was the most frequent activity setting for implementing direct vocabulary teaching. Furthermore, data analysis showed that contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching with an emphasis on the receptive aspect of vocabulary and multimodal vocabulary teaching with an emphasis on the productive aspect of vocabulary were the two basic dimensions that described the preschool teachers' practices. In addition, the results showed that contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching was reported to be used more frequently than multimodal teaching, while both teaching practices were related more strongly to the other activity settings besides story reading.

Keywords: direct vocabulary teaching, contextualized and de-contextualized teaching, multimodal teaching, activity settings, preschool teachers

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary constitutes one of the most important language skills, as it is well-documented for its contribution to young children's literacy development throughout their school years. Indicatively there are plenty of research data showing the significant relation of vocabulary to several literacy skills, such as listening and reading comprehension (e.g. Bleses et al., 2016; Quinn et al., 2015), writing (e.g. Maskor & Baharudin, 2016) and narrative development (e.g. Khan et al., 2021; Korecky-Kröll et al., 2019) either in short-term or in long-term. When examining vocabulary, it is significant to consider its two important dimensions, the receptive and the productive one. Receptive vocabulary includes the total number of words that children or adults recognize and comprehend in speech or while reading (Kamil & Hiebert, 2005). In more detail, receptive vocabulary represents individuals' conceptual knowledge about the surrounding world. This constitutes the basic means to understand all the verbal stimuli that are encountered in our daily lives, something that constitutes a prerequisite for anyone to communicate effectively via oral or written language. Productive vocabulary includes the number of words that children or adults can use appropriately while speaking or writing (Kamil & Hiebert, 2005). Productive vocabulary constitutes part of the receptive one and is activated when someone wants to use the appropriate words to communicate and respond productively to any literacy tasks. Conclusively, it seems that the two dimensions of vocabulary are related significantly to the major skills of oral and written language, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Clenton & Booth, 2020). It is worth mentioning that the receptive vocabulary precedes the productive one and there are differences in their sizes, with the receptive vocabulary being larger than the productive one (Daskalovska, 2020). This means that individuals do not use actively all the words that they understand. So, we cannot assume that the bridge or the transitional path of a word from the receptive to the productive dimension of vocabulary is considered given. These data have several implications in educational practice and constitute useful guidelines for teachers on how to perform vocabulary teaching in their classrooms. Based on these guidelines, the goal of literacy instruction is for children to develop the size of both types of vocabulary as much as possible through systematic instruction that should begin early in children's school life when attending preschool (Neuman & Wright, 2014). Based on all the above, the investigation of how preschool teachers perform vocabulary teaching in real-time circumstances is considered very useful in order to make the appropriate suggestions that could improve their vocabulary practices and consequently young children's vocabulary outcomes.

1.1 Effective vocabulary teaching practices

Defining the activity settings and the practices that teachers could combine to perform effective vocabulary teaching is necessary to help them make the appropriate choices to improve their educational actions adequately. One of the significant

conclusions of the report of the National Reading Panel (2006) with longitudinal effects on literacy instruction refers to the utility of direct vocabulary instruction. Specifically, direct instruction is intentional and uses techniques to help children learn the meaning of targeted word items (Madsen et al., 2023; Marulis & Neuman, 2010). So, direct instruction aims at explicit learning as students consciously make an effort to acquire the material that constitutes the target of instruction (Choo et al., 2012). A second basic conclusion of the report above (2006) is that vocabulary learning is best accomplished when the words that are considered appropriate for instruction are derived from material of different content. According to the aforementioned principle, vocabulary instruction is useful to be spread out in different content areas. These constitute rich learning contexts as they provide children the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary and deepen their knowledge about words already learned by using them in new contexts. So, the context emerges as a significant dimension in vocabulary teaching which is related to contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary instruction. On the one hand, contextualized vocabulary instruction includes techniques that encourage students to process the meaning of words by using information that is derived from the context that they are embedded in. Also, through this way, children expand their conceptualization about the meaning of the words by relating them with background knowledge, new contexts, and circumstances (Graves, 2006). Providing examples and non-examples of the words and discussing with students how the meaning of the words is altered in these different contexts constitute a representative technique of contextualized vocabulary instruction (Nation, 2001). On the other hand, in decontextualized vocabulary instruction the analysis of words is being accomplished without the support of contextual information. This does not mean that the words are removed from any communicative context (e.g. a word can be embedded in text) but instruction focuses on the vocabulary items in isolation from any message/communicative context (Nation, 2001). Providing definitions, synonyms, and antonyms constitutes an indicative technique of decontextualized vocabulary instruction (Nation, 2001). Indeed, there are data showing that both types of vocabulary teaching constitute part of preschool teachers' pedagogical knowledge, which refers to knowing when and what practices to use to teach vocabulary (Phillips et al., 2020). Furthermore, research conducted with students of different ages and language status (e.g. monolingual, second, or foreign language learners) has shown the usefulness of both types of instruction (Silverman, 2007; Unaldi et al., 2013; Uswatunnisa, 2017).

A significant step in designing effective vocabulary instruction after having chosen the appropriate practices is to define the activity setting where vocabulary teaching could be embedded. Story reading constitutes a fundamental language activity and concurrently enables systematic vocabulary instruction by using different types of techniques and methods (Christ & Wang, 2011; Silverman et al., 2013; Vaahtoranta et al., 2018; Wasik et al., 2016). Despite the reported utility of story reading, literacy specialists and data from metaanalysis urge for the expansion of vocabulary teaching in different activity settings and the use of more intense and

strategic methods in order to maximize the effect of instruction in vocabulary learning (Mol et al., 2009; Rahn et al., 2023; Wasik et al., 2016). Indeed, there is evidence showing that young children benefit from practices that are implemented beyond book reading time in other time zones during the daily educational program and in content areas other than language arts, such as science and social sciences (Leung, 2008; Silverman & Crandell, 2010). By using different activity settings, teachers have the opportunity to use elicitation strategies, such as open-ended questions, and more vocabulary-related talk that contributes to children's vocabulary and general language growth (Hadley et al., 2023).

Based on what is mentioned above, a key component in each activity setting is the meaningful verbal interaction taking place between teachers and children. There is research data showing that discussion carried out before, during, and after book reading can contribute to preschoolers' receptive and productive vocabulary (Gonzalez et al., 2014). Instructional conversations resemble the discussion conducted during book reading and constitute a method that could be used in any content area (Goldenberg, 1992). Specifically, instructional conversations have a clear thematic focus. Teachers use questions and techniques that aim to activate children's background knowledge about the topic of the discussion. Concurrently these verbal prompts motivate children to express themselves by using more complex language and any clues (e.g. pictures and text) considered appropriate to explain their thinking and justify their statements (Goldenberg, 1992). It seems that instructional conversations could contribute simultaneously to children's language and comprehension development.

Multimodal teaching, as it is suggested by the National Reading Panel (2006), is a significant practice that could serve as a base that could supply useful tools to teachers for improving vocabulary teaching significantly. Specifically, in multimodal teaching visual, aural, oral, kinesthetic, and written modes can be combined to promote the different aspects of vocabulary, such as the receptive and the expressive one, since they respond to children's different learning styles and to the demands of differentiated instruction. So, in the spectrum of multimodal teaching, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) could be used for teaching vocabulary to young children. Indicatively, data have shown that digital stories and appropriately designed applications could be used to improve instruction and enable vocabulary learning by young children (Baltzaki & Chlapana, 2023; Savva et al. 2022). Furthermore, kinesthetic practices having roots in dramatic play, such as role play, dramatization, or pantomime, could be useful for teachers to engage children in the educational process actively. That is why these practices help children enhance the meaning of acquired vocabulary and use it productively in enjoyable activity settings (Han et al., 2010; Hutagalung et al., 2020; Silverman & Crandell 2010). In addition, retelling constitutes a very popular verbal post-reading activity which, besides promoting text comprehension, motivates children to use productively the words that either were just heard during book reading or were taught by the teachers intentionally with specific techniques (Leung, 2008; Snell et al., 2015). Of course, besides the

use of effective practices, children's repeated exposure to vocabulary is needed to help them retain, retrieve, and use the words that have been taught in different communicative circumstances (Graves, 2006). It seems that the design of multi-method interventions is useful for promoting effective and robust vocabulary teaching which combines the practices mentioned above (Christ & Wang, 2011).

1.2 Preschool teachers' vocabulary teaching in school settings

What is the "status quo" regarding vocabulary instruction in preschool settings? Are the practices used by the teachers aligned with the recommendations derived from research data? Are the practices that the teachers use in real-time instruction adequate to help preschoolers enhance their vocabulary skills? Descriptive studies have been conducted in preschool settings to address the aforementioned questions. On the one hand, as far as we know, there are few studies investigating preschool teachers' vocabulary teaching in the spectrum of book read-alouds. Specifically, Dickinson and Smith (1994) investigated the natural story reading styles adopted by preschool teachers ($n = 25$) and correlated the emerged story reading styles and the specific types of talk that occurred during the read-aloud sessions with children's vocabulary and comprehension outcomes. The results showed that analytical talk, a feature related mainly to the performance-oriented style, included the analysis of text vocabulary. This type of talk was significantly correlated with the children's vocabulary gains. In more detail, the meaning of the words was analyzed through definitions and clues extracted from book illustrations, sentence context, and the general meaning of the story. These techniques resemble contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary teaching. The interactive nature of the discussion was emphasized as a feature that might have also contributed to children's vocabulary gains.

Han et al. (2005) in a subsequent study investigated the vocabulary instructional strategies employed by preschool teachers ($n = 16$) in two settings where two different curricula were adopted. The researchers chose a large group-time activity including mainly read-aloud to conduct their observations. The most common pattern that the teachers used to teach vocabulary included two steps. In the first one, the teachers pronounced the word and in the second one, they asked the children to repeat the phonological representation of the word. Significantly less frequent were the techniques referring to the definition of the words and to other graphophonemic or semantic properties of the words, which resemble the analytical talk described by Dickinson and Smith (1994). Differences were found according to the curriculum that was used in each setting.

Moreover, Silverman and Crandell (2010) added to the research conducted up to then, by highlighting an important feature of effective vocabulary instruction, meaning the role of the context. Specifically, in their study, they found that the most frequent practice that preschool teachers ($n = 16$) used in read-aloud and non-read-aloud activities was the *contextualize* one, which encouraged children to apply target words in contexts different from the ones that they were first introduced. The *define*

practice was the second most frequently used one in both settings. The teachers used this practice to explain the meaning of a word by providing its definition and helping children elaborate on its meaning in relation to the context that the word was initially embedded. Less frequent with significant distribution in both activity settings were the practices that the teachers used to help children recognize the relationships among words (e.g. antonyms or synonyms). Also quite rarely they encouraged children to use the target words in writing or reading instruction (e.g. phonics, spelling, phonemic awareness), point to target words in book illustrations and act out their meaning. Furthermore, the practices in both activity settings were positively correlated with each other with the exception of the practice involving the use of the target words in writing or reading instruction. Specifically, this practice in the context of story reading was negatively correlated with the rest type of practices.

The findings in the subsequent study of Lipsky (2013) do not align fully with the ones presented so far (Silverman & Crandell, 2010). Particularly the results showed that the preschool teachers ($n = 23$) more frequently used definition techniques (e.g. definitions and synonyms) to explain the meaning of a word to preschoolers while reading a book. Far fewer and less frequent were the contextualization and orthographic-phonological techniques which encouraged children to process the meaning of words in relation to relevant contextual information. A small percentage of the sample teachers did not use any technique to teach vocabulary when reading. It is worth mentioning that Lipsky and Adelman (2016) extended the previous study (Lipsky, 2013) by observing one shared reading session in 52 preschool teachers who worked in private preschools ($n = 29$) or in Head Start programs ($n = 23$). A discouraging result referred to the lack of any use of vocabulary teaching by a significant number of the sample teachers. The remaining teachers, like in the study of Lipsky (2013), used more frequently techniques which are related to decontextualized vocabulary teaching, such as definitions, synonyms, recasts, questions, and prompts which encouraged children to define a word, act out its meaning and point it in book illustration. Once again, less common were contextualization techniques which aimed at helping children connect the meaning of a word with the content and the illustration of a book or with their personal experience.

On the other hand, as far as we know, there are studies investigating preschool teachers' vocabulary teaching in different activity settings including book read-aloud. Particularly, O'Leary et al. (2010) in their study showed that vocabulary instruction implemented by preschool teachers ($n = 137$) was mostly unplanned and driven by children's spontaneous comments and curiosity to learn the meaning of unknown words. When planned instruction was performed, it was embedded in a context having a thematic focus (e.g. a shared reading or a thematic teaching approach). As far as the techniques they used to explain the meaning of the newly introduced vocabulary, visual aids, flashcards, synonyms, and questions asking children whether they knew the meaning of a word were some of the most frequently reported ones. Book reading emerged as a usual activity context for vocabulary teaching as well as other types of activities carried out in whole groups' settings. The

results showing that most of the teachers took advantage of child-initiated play, such as dramatic play and blocks, to introduce new vocabulary were quite interesting. Despite the reference to the aforementioned practices and techniques, a general notion that emerged from the data was that vocabulary instruction lacked techniques, which would enable children to acquire a more complete knowledge of the introduced vocabulary. That was because it did not include features that helped them reinforce and extend the meaning of the words.

Wright and Neuman (2014) in a relevant study conducted in kindergarten settings ($n = 55$ classrooms) of different socio-economic status, similar to the studies mentioned above, found that vocabulary teaching was minimal during the school day. While being insufficient, read-aloud was the most usual activity used by teachers for vocabulary teaching. Fewer was the time devoted to activities related to science and social instruction, which nevertheless provided ample opportunities for vocabulary teaching. The vocabulary teaching patterns observed in the aforementioned contexts were two. According to the first one, the teachers interrupted the activity and provided a brief explanation of a word derived from the text. According to the second one, they asked the students to explain the meaning of a word using their background knowledge, and then they provided a brief definition. Generally, vocabulary explanations were very brief and served the immediate context of the activity. There was no clear intention to help children expand the acquired knowledge in relation to how the words could be used in different communicative contexts.

Evensen Hansen (2020) highlighted a new dimension in real-time vocabulary instruction in preschool, since he investigated the educational language practices observed in four toddler groups characterized by supportive language-learning environments, as the latter were estimated with appropriate tools. Results showed that teachers in these settings used techniques to constantly enhance children's language production. Specifically, they took advantage mostly of the circle time, where usually several curriculum activities are carried out, to promote vocabulary teaching. Words explanations were placed in a continuum of steps and techniques. Firstly, they responded to children's attempts to speak, then they added words and extended children's utterances and at last, they explained the meaning of words. They explained the meaning of the words by relating them with concepts, events, and actions. They also helped children to come to appropriate conclusions. Direct vocabulary teaching, including purposeful discussion, seemed to be a concrete feature of the teachers' practices.

Dwyer and Harbaugh (2020) added to the research conducted so far by investigating how preschool teachers ($n = 8$) supported vocabulary development in activity settings with or without a content focus. Similarly, to the study of Wright and Neuman (2014), the density of vocabulary support was not sufficient during the daily program. The read-aloud time was used for providing a more robust vocabulary support as compared to the other activity settings without a content focus. In relation to the activities having a content focus, although they occupied a small percentage

of the daily program, science, as compared to social studies, writing, mathematics, and reading, was the one that was characterized by the densest vocabulary support. No concrete activity settings were observed having a clear vocabulary support focus.

The results in the study of Dwyer and Schachter (2020) are also interesting, as they investigated, besides the vocabulary teaching practices used by preschool teachers ($n = 10$), the rationale behind the selection of the observed instructional strategies. Results showed that most of the observed strategies, such as naming concepts and objects, providing the definitions of the words, and relating the words with examples of the children's lives, were receptive in nature. There were just a few instructional strategies, such as asking children to repeat the phonological representation of a word, which were more productive in nature. The intention of the preschool teachers was to use instructional strategies that were appropriate for the children's characteristics and to be focused on the knowledge, which was relevant to the context that served as a teachable moment for providing vocabulary support.

Johnston, in the most recent study (2023), investigated besides preschool teachers' ($n = 7$) vocabulary teaching practices, their knowledge about vocabulary importance. Results are discouraging, since they showed that the teachers neither recognized the utility of vocabulary teaching for children's reading, nor their knowledge and use of practices reflected the characteristics of robust and effective vocabulary teaching. An interesting result emerged from the data referring to the story reading practice. Specifically, story reading was usually performed with multimodal texts and that was the most frequent context implementing vocabulary teaching. Specifically, before and during reading, the teachers implemented techniques related to direct vocabulary teaching. These included questions asking children to provide the label of the words, examples and visual aids of the targeted vocabulary, and acting out the words. There were also instances where lessons irrelevant to language focus, such as math and science focus, were used by the teachers to explain related vocabulary.

1.3 The present study

The research data presented in the previous subsections provide interesting information about how preschool teachers perform direct vocabulary teaching in school and on some occasions describe contradictory findings. Specifically, there are few studies that examined vocabulary teaching mainly in book-reading settings. In these studies, it has been shown that preschool teachers adopt a brief direct vocabulary teaching pattern comprised mostly of techniques involving mainly the basic semantic information of the words (e.g. definitions and synonyms) (Han et al., 2005; Lipsky, 2013; Lipsky & Adelman, 2016). There are also studies showing that preschool teachers adopted a more analytical vocabulary teaching pattern that includes, besides definitional information, the use of contextual information for helping children acquire a more complete knowledge about the meaning of the words (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Silverman & Crandell, 2010). It can be concluded that in the studies above several dimensions of direct vocabulary teaching were emphasized that differentiate

preschool teachers' practices. Furthermore, as far as we know, few studies exist investigating preschool teachers' vocabulary teaching practices in different activity settings. According to the available findings, book reading emerged as the most common activity setting for vocabulary teaching (Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020; Johnston, 2023; O'Leary et al., 2010; Wright & Neuman, 2014). Furthermore, other non-book reading activities with a content focus, such as math, social and science studies (Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020; Wright & Neuman, 2014), or without a content focus, such as children-initiated play (O'Leary et al., 2010), emerged as contexts for promoting vocabulary teaching. It is worth mentioning that the activities with a content focus provided opportunities for a more robust vocabulary teaching (Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020; Johnston, 2023). The frequency that the vocabulary explanation practices were implemented could be different according to the activity setting that the vocabulary instruction was carried out (Silverman & Crandell, 2010). Furthermore, in the majority of the reported studies, vocabulary teaching, as it was applied by the teachers, was simplified and comprised mostly of simple definitions and recasts (Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020; Dwyer & Schachter, 2020; O'Leary et al., 2010; Wright & Neuman, 2014). There was only one study that highlighted a more intense vocabulary teaching and the role of analytical conversations in it (Evensen Hansen, 2020). Also, in only one study the receptive and productive dimensions of vocabulary were reported in relation to the teaching techniques (Dwyer & Schachter, 2020). Similarly, in only one study the role of ICTs and specifically the role of multimodal texts was reported in the spectrum of vocabulary teaching (Johnston, 2023).

Conclusively, taking into consideration the aforementioned information, despite the common features that were observed regarding direct vocabulary teaching in preschool settings, different aspects emerged in different studies. Indicatively, the teaching processes favoring the receptive and the productive aspect of vocabulary, the preference for decontextualized or contextualized vocabulary teaching, the use of ICTs, and the activity settings with and without a content focus were the most indicative ones. All the reported results, as it is already mentioned, concern direct vocabulary teaching which is based on the use of specific techniques for explaining the meaning of unknown words purposefully. It is worth mentioning that the multidimensionality of vocabulary teaching and the small sample size in most of the studies (e.g. 8-137 teachers), due to the observational nature of the methodology that was used, call upon the utility of conducting more descriptive studies using bigger samples. This could be useful in order to acquire a more recent overview of the different aspects that characterize direct vocabulary teaching in preschool settings.

Based on the above the above, the present study aims to investigate further direct vocabulary teaching, as it is performed in preschool settings, and specifically to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the most frequent activity settings having a content focus that preschool teachers use to provide direct vocabulary teaching in real-time instruction?

- 2) What is the dimensionality of direct vocabulary teaching as it is performed by preschool teachers?
- 3) How frequently do preschool teachers use different types of direct vocabulary teaching techniques in real-time instruction?
- 4) How the different dimensions of the direct vocabulary teaching are related to the activity settings that could be used to support vocabulary learning by young children?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sample

Convenience sampling was used to recruit the sample of the present study which consisted of 274 in-service preschool teachers (269 females and 5 males), working in public preschools located in different regions of Crete in Greece. Most of the sample preschool teachers were up to 50 years old and had been working in public preschools for 11-20 years (see Table 1). Furthermore, the majority of them hold a bachelor's degree from several University Departments of Preschool Education in Greece ($n = 177, 64,4\%$). A relatively high percentage ($n = 94, 34,4\%$) holds a master's degree, while just a few hold a doctoral degree ($n = 4, 1,5\%$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, preschool teachers' age and teaching experience

Age	n	%
>=30 years old	30	11.3
31-40 years old	75	27.3
41-50 years old	89	32.4
51-60 years old	79	28.7
<61 years old	1	0.4
Total	274	100.0
Teaching experience	n	%
> =3 years	38	13.8
4-10	35	12.7
11-20	116	42.2
21-30	67	24.7
<30	18	6.5
Total	274	100.0

2.2 Method and research tool

A descriptive study was carried out to answer the research questions of the present study. This type of study was considered more appropriate, since the purpose of descriptive studies is to describe themes or conditions as they develop in real-time circumstances and not to manipulate any type of variables to answer the research purpose and the relevant questions (Siedlecki, 2020). Specifically, the objectives of the

present study, under the spectrum of its general purpose, concern the investigation of the frequency that preschool teachers use different activity settings to teach vocabulary to young children directly (see below the information concerning the second part of the questionnaire). Furthermore, how frequently the different direct vocabulary techniques are used by preschool teachers and whether there are any underlying dimensions that differentiate their practices in action are objectives that are related to the second and the third purpose of the present study (see below the information concerning the third part of the questionnaire).

2.2.1 Questionnaire

A three-part questionnaire consisting of 22 items was developed to explore preschool teachers' practices in relation to the activity settings they are used to teaching vocabulary and the techniques they prefer to implement. A short version with less than 30 items was preferred to avoid responders' tiredness, keep their attention intact, and keep them interested in the questionnaire topics (Phellas et al., 2012; Sharma, 2022).

The first part consisted of three (4) closed-type questions for describing kindergarten teachers' gender, age, studies and years of teaching experience. For selecting the items included in the second and third parts of the questionnaire, the basic principles of effective vocabulary teaching were taken into consideration. These principles refer to: (a) the design of techniques that present information about the meaning of the words and the different contexts that the words can be used, (b) the necessity of children's active involvement in the teaching process, (c) their repeated exposure to vocabulary that they had been taught, and (d) the provision of opportunities for children to use the taught vocabulary productively (Beck et al., 2021; Blachowicz et al., 2005; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Specifically, the second part consisted of four (4) closed-type questions investigating the frequency at which the sample preschool teachers teach vocabulary in their classrooms and the main activity settings having a content focus that they use to embed vocabulary teaching (see Appendix). The reliability of this part of the questionnaire, as it was calculated with the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, was considered high, $\alpha = 0.854$. The third part of the questionnaire included fifteen (15) closed-type questions referring to the well-documented techniques that could be used for covering the goal and the demands of effective vocabulary instruction (see Appendix). The reliability of this part of the questionnaire, as it was calculated once again with the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, was considered high, $\alpha = 0.912$. Preschool teachers' answers to the items of the second and the third part of the questionnaire were recorded on 5-point Likert scales having the following values 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = often, 3 = very often, and 4 = always. The questionnaire was pilot-tested by five (5) preschool teachers not included in the study, who had expertise in language issues as indicated by their post-graduate studies and their in-service training. Their comments in relation to the

content and the wording of the selected items were taken into consideration to conclude to the final formulation of the questionnaire.

2.2.2 *Data analysis*

To answer the first research question (What are the most frequent activity settings having a content focus that preschool teachers use to provide direct vocabulary teaching in real-time instruction?), at the first step of the data analysis the descriptive statistics related to the questions included in the second part of the questionnaire were provided. At the second step, paired sample t-tests were performed to examine whether the difference in the mean frequency that is observed between the different pairs of questions is statistically significant, a prerequisite for the generalization of the results to the population of preschool teachers. Subsequently, to answer the second research question of the present study (What is the dimensionality of direct vocabulary teaching as it is performed by preschool teachers?) a factor analysis was performed on the third part of the questionnaire with the aim to identify whether the grouping of the included questions reveals any underlying dimensions that characterize and differentiate preschool teachers' direct vocabulary techniques. Descriptive statistics for the items included in each emerged dimension were provided to answer the third research question (How frequently do preschool teachers use different types of direct vocabulary teaching techniques in real-time instruction?). Additionally, a paired sample *t* test was performed once again to identify whether the observed difference in the frequency of the two emerged patterns of direct vocabulary teaching is statistically different, so as to determine whether it is feasible for the results to be generalized to the population of preschool teachers. Lastly, Pearson correlations were made between the two emerged dimensions and the items related to the second part of the questionnaire to examine which activity setting favors most the implementation of two emerged dimensions of direct vocabulary teaching.

2.3 *Procedure*

When the final formulation of the questionnaire was completed, it was sent via Google Forms to the Primary Education Directorates of Crete which in turn distributed it to the in-service teachers who were under their jurisdiction. Google Forms were preferred for collecting the data, since they are considered appropriate for distributing short questionnaires in web surveys (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). To ensure participants' anonymity, the participants were not asked to record any personal information related to their identity (e.g. name) and working environment (e.g. the name of the kindergarten where they had been working). The survey was available for one month for kindergarten teachers to record their answers.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Activity settings for vocabulary teaching

The first research question of the present study aimed at investigating the frequency at which preschool teachers teach vocabulary in their classrooms and as well as which are the most frequent activity settings used as contexts for achieving this goal. Results showed that the sample's preschool teachers teach quite often vocabulary in their classrooms, while story reading is the most frequent context for implementing techniques used for the aforementioned purpose (see Table 2). Paired sample *t* tests conducted subsequently confirmed that story reading is significantly more frequently used by the preschool teachers than instructional conversations ($t(273) = 6.121, p < 0.001$) and curriculum activities with non-language focus ($t(273) = 6.615, p < 0.001$). No statistical difference was found in the frequency that the preschool teachers used instructional conversations and curriculum activities with non-language focus as contexts to teach vocabulary ($t(273) = -1.007, p > 0.05$).

Table 2. Mean scores (*M*) and standard deviation (*sd*) of practices describing the context of vocabulary teaching

	M	SD
Frequency of vocabulary teaching	2.59	0.85
Instructional conversations	2.69	0.83
Story reading	2.97	0.88
Curriculum activities with non-language content focus	2.64	0.85

3.2 Preschool teachers' techniques about vocabulary teaching

For investigating the second research question of the present study, it was considered significant to reduce and categorize the items of the second part of the questionnaire in a restricted number of manageable and meaningful factors, which illustrate the basic dimensions of vocabulary teaching. So, a factor analysis was performed in the second part of the questionnaire to achieve this goal. The value of 0.904 of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Test in combination with the small value of the significance level ($\chi^2(105) = 2063.799, p < 0.001$) in the Bartlett's test of sphericity, indicated that the data of the present study were suitable for structure detection. So, a factor analysis with the principal component method was performed in the 15 items of the questionnaire resulting in the extraction of two components with eigenvalue ≥ 1 . Both factors accounted for 54.36% of total variance. The first one accounting for 46.11% of the total variance describes the preschool teachers' techniques related to multimodal vocabulary teaching ($\alpha = 0.872$). The second one accounts for 8.25% of the total variance and includes items that are related to techniques concerning contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary teaching ($\alpha = 0.854$). The

value of the Cronbach alpha coefficient in both factors adds to the general internal consistency of the third part of the questionnaire. In Table 3 the questionnaire items loadings in the two extracted factors are presented.

Table 3. Factor loadings of the questions regarding preschool teachers' (N = 274) vocabulary teaching techniques on the two factors extracted with Principal Component analysis with Varimax rotation

		F1	F2
Multimodal vocabulary teaching techniques	Story dramatization	0.798	
	Role play related to the meaning of words	0.786	
	Repeated reading	0.707	
	Retelling	0.692	
	Constructive play	0.655	
	Rewording words definition	0.608	
	Words imitation with facial expression and gestures	0.573	
	Words recording in thematic dictionaries to cover communication needs	0.547	
	ICT use	0.430	
Techniques for contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary	Questions for activating prior knowledge related to words meaning		0.778
	Synonyms and antonyms		0.772
	Questions for connecting words meaning with text content		
	Visual aids (pictures, objects)		0.718
	Sentences for displaying words use in different contexts		0.684
	Words morphological analysis		0.529

The two factors mentioned above were used in the second step of the data analysis to describe the preschool teachers' vocabulary teaching practices with accuracy and answer the third research question. In relation to the factor concerning multimodal vocabulary teaching, retelling constitutes the most frequently used technique. Second in the implementation frequency are techniques derived from dramatic arts, such as dramatization, role play, and imitation of words meaning with facial expressions and gestures. The least frequent, as it can be seen in Table 4, are the techniques related to digital (e.g. ICT) and non-digital means (e.g. thematic dictionaries) used to store acquired vocabulary and make it available to cover several communication needs (see Table 4).

In relation to the factor concerning contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary teaching, as it can be seen in Table 5, the morphological analysis of the words constitutes the predominant technique used by the preschool teachers. Less frequent are techniques aiming to help children connect the meaning of words with their background knowledge and with the content of the text in which they are embedded. The presentation of the same words in different sentences, that constitute contexts different from the ones that the words were first seen by children, was the least frequently used technique.

Table 4. Mean scores (*M*) and standard deviation (*sd*) of the implementation frequency of techniques related to multimodal vocabulary teaching

	M	SD
Words imitation with facial expression and gestures (pantomime)	2.33	0.98
Story dramatization	2.58	0.96
Repeated reading	2.04	1.06
Role play related to the meaning of words	2.50	0.95
Constructive play	2.27	1.01
Words recording in thematic dictionaries to cover communication needs	1.94	1.10
Retelling	2.74	0.86
ICT use	2.02	1.01
Rewording words definition	2.28	0.95

Table 5. Mean scores (*M*) and standard deviation (*sd*) of the implementation frequency of techniques related to contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching

	M	SD
Definitions, synonyms and antonyms	2.73	0.83
Sentences for displaying words use in different contexts	2.38	0.89
Visual aids (pictures, objects)	2.83	0.95
Questions for activating prior knowledge related to words meaning	2.81	0.84
Questions for connecting words meaning with text content	2.77	0.77
Words morphological analysis	2.97	0.79
N = 274		

As the next step in the data analysis, the mean scores for the extracted factors were calculated in order to describe which of the two general vocabulary teaching practices that emerged from the data constitutes the most preferable one by the preschool teachers (see Table 6). So, a paired sample *t* test was performed once again and the results showed that the preschool teachers use techniques related to contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching with significantly greater frequency than techniques that aim at multimodal vocabulary teaching, $t(273) = -14.364$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 6. Mean scores (*M*) and standard deviation (*sd*) of each factor regarding preschool teachers' vocabulary teaching practices

	M	SD
Multimodal vocabulary teaching techniques	2.30	0.69
Techniques for contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching	2.75	0.64

At the last step of the data analysis and in order to answer the fourth research question of the present study Pearson correlations were computed between the targeted activity settings and the emerged patterns of the preschool teachers' vocabulary practices. Results showed (see Table 7) that all the activity settings were positively and significantly correlated with the two vocabulary teaching patterns. This means

that the preschool teachers who implemented all the reported activities also used both types of instruction to teach vocabulary more frequently. It is worth mentioning that instructional conversations and curriculum activities with non-language content focus had higher correlations with both types of vocabulary teaching as compared to the story reading context.

Table 7. Pearson correlations between activity settings and the two emerged dimensions of preschool teachers' vocabulary teaching practices

	Multimodal vocabulary teaching	Contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching
Instructional conversations	0.522**	0.616**
Story reading	0.479**	0.565**
Curriculum activities with non-language content focus	0.509**	0.579**

*Note: ** = $p < 0.01$*

4. DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the practices that preschool teachers use to teach vocabulary in school settings. Several parameters emerged from the data describing the multidimensionality of vocabulary teaching and providing indications that could improve educational practice in real-time instruction.

The first research question of the present study concerned the activity settings that the teachers use to provide direct vocabulary teaching as well as the frequency at which they intentionally teach new words. The results showed that story reading constitutes the most frequent activity setting for performing vocabulary teaching. The difference in the implementation frequency compared to the other activity settings, despite being small, was statistically significant. The results of the present study are in accordance with previous studies conducted in different educational settings (Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020; Johnston, 2023; O'Leary et al., 2010; Wright & Neuman, 2014) and highlight the established utility and use of read-aloud in vocabulary teaching. Preschool teachers seem to be familiar with this activity which is traditionally being used to help preschoolers achieve several literacy goals among which is vocabulary. Vocabulary teaching through story reading is meaningful for young children because it is conducted in the context of an activity that children love and are accustomed to. Also, they realize that they have to acknowledge the meaning of the words in order to follow the story plot and comprehend the text. These might be possible reasons explaining the teachers' preference for story reading as context for teaching vocabulary. Indeed, there are research data showing that preschool teachers take advantage of children's spontaneous comments to teach them the meaning of unknown words during story reading (O'Leary et al., 2010). According to the sample teachers' self-reports, instructional conversations, which resemble the analytical

talk observed by Dickinson and Smith (1994), and the curriculum activities with non-language content focus, as they were also observed in relevant studies (Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020; Wright & Neuman, 2014), emerged as quite frequent contexts for teaching vocabulary. These results provide promising indications that align with the basic conclusion of the National Reading Panel's report (2006) and stand for the expansion of vocabulary instruction in different content areas and activity settings. That is why children need to be exposed to the taught words repeatedly and in different settings in order to realize the semantic relationships among them and to learn new vocabulary by using the information provided in the different content areas (Graves & Slater 2016). The results of the present study are also quite interesting as they provide indications about the frequency of vocabulary instruction in preschool. Specifically, the sample teachers reported that they teach vocabulary in their classrooms quite frequently. These results contradict with the ones in previous studies which showed that vocabulary instruction is not as intense as expected so as to help children develop their vocabulary skills adequately (Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020; Lipsky & Adelman, 2016; Wright & Neuman, 2014). Despite being very encouraging and showing a change in teachers' practices in the more recent years favoring vocabulary instruction in school settings (Graves, 2006), the different methodology used in the present study (self-reports via questionnaire) and the previous studies (observations conducted by the researchers) might explain the differences in the results. More research is needed to answer this question.

The second research question of the present study concerned the investigation of the dimensionality of the direct vocabulary teaching. The results of the present study, as they were extracted through factor analysis, revealed two major dimensions. The first one refers to the use of techniques related to contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching, a dimension that also emerged in the preschool teachers' pedagogical knowledge about the practices that could be used for vocabulary teaching in the study of Philips et al. (2020). A closer look at the items included in this dimension highlights the morphological analysis of the words as the most frequent technique. This is an interesting finding since it reveals a technique not previously reported in the relevant research described so far. Furthermore, it is interesting because it belongs to techniques that aim to help children develop word-learning strategies (Graves & Slater 2016). Specifically, making children capable of recognizing and using the words' morphological units, which constitute the words' basic semantic units, helps them figure out the meaning of the unknown words (Ramirez et al., 2014). Less but quite frequent were the techniques referred to the use of visual aids, definitions, synonyms and antonyms, and questions that encouraged children to relate the meaning of the words with text and background knowledge. These results agree with the ones reported so far and describe either a brief vocabulary teaching pattern adopted by the preschool teachers (Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020; Dwyer & Schachter, 2020; Han et al., 2005; Lipsky, 2013; Lipsky & Adelman, 2016; O'Leary et al., 2010; Wright & Neuman, 2014) or a more extended and elaborated one (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Evensen Hansen, 2020; Silverman & Crandell, 2010).

The above findings which also answer the third research question of the present study are useful because they provide indications about the universality of preschool teachers' vocabulary practices. These refer to the utility of using contextualized and de-contextualized direct vocabulary instruction techniques to help children improve their vocabulary skills (Graves & Slater 2016; Madsen et al., 2023; Marulis & Neuman, 2010; National Reading Panel, 2006).

The second dimension of direct vocabulary teaching in the present study which emerged from the factor analysis has features related to multimodal vocabulary teaching. This is a parameter that extends the relevant research reported so far by providing another aspect, which supplements preschool teachers' current vocabulary teaching practices. Specifically, multimodality, as already mentioned, has to do with the combination of different modes in order to enable children's expression and learning. The items included in this dimension refer to techniques concerning verbal and kinesthetic modes, such as retelling, story dramatization, and pantomime, visual modes, such as pictures, and tactile modes, such as constructive play, or to techniques combining several types of modes, such as the ICTs. It is worth mentioning that techniques like the ones mentioned above were reported in just few relevant studies (Johnston, 2023; O'Leary et al., 2010). According to the sample teachers' self-reports, the use of the aforementioned practices is quite frequent, with story retelling and dramatization being the most frequent ones. This might be explained by the fact that these two procedures constitute traditional post-reading activities for enhancing children's language skills and text comprehension. In the present study, story reading emerged as the predominant activity setting for conducting vocabulary teaching. So, it is possible that the connection between these three practices concluded with the results mentioned above. ICT was the least frequently used technique, according to the teachers' self-reports. Based on this result, there is a need to enrich teachers' pedagogical knowledge in using ICT in vocabulary teaching more systematically. That is because through ICT children benefit from the interactive features of the digital applications to learn vocabulary. They also have the opportunity to search for and combine several sources in order to construct the meaning of newly introduced words and use them to cover several educational and communication needs (Eutsler et al., 2020). The conclusions that can be drawn when examining both dimensions of the direct vocabulary teaching, which are derived from the data in relation to the receptive and the productive aspect of vocabulary as well as in relation to their reported frequency of use, are of interest. Specifically, when examining the items included in the contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching, we could support that most of them support the receptive nature of vocabulary since they emphasize procedures that help children acknowledge definitional and contextual information related to the meaning of the words. Apparent procedures that encourage children to use the words do not seem to be included. On the contrary, a closer look at the items included in the dimension of multimodal vocabulary teaching highlights the twofold purpose of this practice. Specifically, on the one hand, there are few items included, such as repeated reading, which aim at helping children

retain the acquired knowledge about the vocabulary that they had been taught. On the other hand, most of the included items, such as retelling and story dramatization, describe techniques that encourage children to use the words; a procedure that is related to the productive aspect of vocabulary. Furthermore, when comparing the frequency that the sample teachers reported using the two practices, the results showed that the difference in the frequency of use, despite being small, was statistically significant. In more detail, contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary teaching was reported to be more frequently used than multimodal vocabulary teaching. The aforementioned conclusion agrees with the results of previous studies describing relevant techniques used by preschool teachers being embedded in the spectrum of contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching (Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020; Dwyer & Schachter, 2020; Han et al., 2005; Johnston, 2023; Lipsky, 2013; Lipsky & Adelman, 2016; O'Leary et al., 2010; Silverman & Crandell, 2010; Wright & Neuman, 2014). It also agrees with the conclusion reported in the study of Dwyer and Schachter (2020), which supported that most of the strategies that the preschool teachers used to teach vocabulary were receptive in nature. Overall, the above results stress the need for preschool teachers to maintain a balance in the frequency that they use practices that could support vocabulary learning by young children. Also, this balance is useful for helping them move the words that they had been taught from the receptive to the productive vocabulary while processing the meaning and use of the words in creative ways (Graves, 2006).

The conclusions that could be reached when examining the results concerning the relation between the frequency that the sample teachers reported using the indicated activity settings and the emerged vocabulary teaching practices can be quite useful. Likewise the study of Silverman and Crandell (2010), the observed correlations were positive, meaning that the teachers who reported using the indicated activity settings more frequently were also the ones using both vocabulary teaching practices equally as frequently.

What is also worth commenting on is the value of correlation coefficients. Specifically, the coefficient values were higher for the relation between the two types of vocabulary teaching and the activity settings concerning the instructional conversations and curriculum activities with non-language content focus. These findings agree with the ones in the studies of Dwyer and Harbaugh (2020) and Johnston (2023) who observed activities with a content focus other than language arts, such as science and social sciences, providing opportunities for a more robust vocabulary teaching. They also agree with a basic principle concerning vocabulary learning which supports that children benefit from varied and rich language experiences, and discussions constitute such a context (Graves, 2006).

5. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The results of the present study are quite encouraging as they indicate a slight change in preschool practices favoring vocabulary teaching in school settings.

Several dimensions emerged having implications for pedagogical practice. The first one has to do with the activity settings used to conduct vocabulary teaching. According to the results of the present study, while all the indicated activity settings have been reported to be used quite frequently, story reading appeared to be the predominant one. So, preschool teachers need to expand vocabulary teaching in different activity settings more systematically. This would be helpful in fostering children's word consciousness, meaning that they are aware of the words that are around them in different sources and they are being motivated to learn vocabulary (Graves, 2006). Furthermore, the spread out of vocabulary teaching in different activity settings would enable them to retain taught vocabulary and learn new sophisticated one. It also would help children develop depth of vocabulary knowledge, which in some part concerns the knowledge of how the meaning of the words can be altered according to context.

Furthermore, contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching and multimodal vocabulary teaching emerged as the two dimensions describing the preschool teachers' vocabulary teaching practices, with the former related mainly to the receptive aspect of vocabulary and the latter to the productive one. While both practices are reported to be used quite frequently, contextualized and de-contextualized vocabulary teaching was the most frequent one. While the techniques included in this practice are traditional and documented for their contribution to children's vocabulary learning, preschool teachers' practices need to incorporate techniques that could respond to children's different learning styles and help them move the words they learn to their productive vocabulary. Multimodal vocabulary teaching, as described from the data of the present study, includes techniques that represent different modalities and could encourage children to learn and use vocabulary in creative ways. Vocabulary teaching in preschool needs to be meaningful, enjoyable, and multifaced to respond to children's different characteristics and help them expand their vocabulary trajectories adequately.

Of course, it is worth mentioning that the methodology used for collecting the data and specifically the preschool teachers' self-reports via questionnaire constitutes a basic limitation in the present study. That is why there is a danger for the study participants to overestimate their practices and as a result their answers might not reflect their actual practices or characteristics. Despite the fact that the present study provides strong indications about preschool teachers' vocabulary teaching practices, the combination of different methodologies, such as interviews and observations of preschool teachers' practice in natural school settings and the recruiting of sample teachers from different regions of Greece could be useful for more reliable conclusions to be arrived at.

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APPENDIX

Second part of the questionnaire

1. How often do you teach vocabulary in your classroom?
2. How often do you use the instructional conversations that you carry out in the classroom for discussing curricular topics with children as a context for teaching them vocabulary?
3. How often do you use story reading as a context for teaching children vocabulary?
4. How often do you use non-language activities, such as math or science content focus ones, as a context for teaching vocabulary to children?

Third part of the questionnaire

1. How often do you encourage children to dramatize the story you read with the aim to use the words that you taught them?
2. How often do you engage children in role-play activities to help them reinforce the meaning of the words that you taught them?
3. How often do you use the repeating reading of a story as a practice to help children reinforce the meaning of the words that you have taught them?
4. How often do you encourage children to retell the story you read with the aim to use the words that you taught them?
5. How often do you engage children in constructive play to help them reinforce the meaning of the words that you taught them?
6. How often do you encourage children to express in their own words the definition of the words that you taught them?
7. How often do you encourage children to represent with facial expressions and gestures the meaning of the words that you taught them?
8. How often do you encourage children to record, in any way they can, the words that you taught them in thematic dictionaries?
9. How often do you use ICT while teaching vocabulary in your classroom?
10. How often, while teaching vocabulary, you ask questions that encourage children connect the meaning of the words with their background knowledge and experiences?
11. How often, while teaching vocabulary, do you present the synonyms and antonyms of the words that you explain to children?
12. How often, while reading a book to children, do you ask questions that encourage them to connect the meaning of words incorporated in the text with its content?
13. How often do you display pictures or realia that represent the meaning of the words that you teach children?
14. How often do you use different sentences to show to children how the words that you taught them are used in different contexts?

15. How often do you encourage children to recognize the morphological units of the words that you teach them so as to help them understand their meaning more easily?