Educational language practices described by preschool teachers in Norwegian kindergartens

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This article focuses on educational language practices as described by preschool teachers in Norwegian kindergartens in groups consisting of one-to-three-year-old children. Research indicates a relationship between high-quality childcare and language development, yet there is a need for more research on educational practices in high-quality settings. The kindergartens in this study have a high score (five to seven/good to excellent) on the subscale 'Listening and Talking' on the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised. The study is based on qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with six preschool teachers in four kindergartens. The findings indicate a holistic dialogical approach to educational language practices. Varied social settings and strategies are used for language learning and aspects of planning and assessment are seen as important in these kindergartens. The preschool teachers highlight the importance of children's language learning during day-to-day activities in kindergarten.

Keywords: educational language practices, language learning environment, ECEC quality, one-to-three-year-olds, ITERS-R

Introduction

Supporting children's language learning has high priority in Norwegian kindergartens, and the focus on language seems to be increasing (Gulbrandsen and Eliassen 2013; Østrem et al. 2009). Research exists on how preschool teachers can support and promote children's language learning in groups consisting of three-to-six-year-old children (Gjems 2013; Gjems and Løkken 2011); however, there is a need for research on educational language practices among one-to-three-year-old children in relation to aspects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) quality (Sandvik, Garmann, and Tkachenko 2014). The Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R) is
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one of the most widely used observational measurement tools for describing the characteristics of a global quality in ECEC settings for infants and toddlers internationally (Mathers et al. 2007; Harms, Cryer, and Clifford 2006). The study presented in this article is an independent part of the national longitudinal research project *Better provision for Norway's children in Early Childhood Education and Care* (BePro; www.goban.no) which focuses on ECEC quality.

In this study, the focus is on educational work on language learning in groups of children aged between one and three years old. The aim of the study is to examine Norwegian kindergarten staff’s description of how they support and promote children's language development. Accordingly the research question is: *what characterises educational language practices as described by preschool teachers in kindergartens with high quality scores on ITERS-R?* Educational language practices are defined as 'practices concerning work, planning and assessment'. The study is based on sociocultural theoretical perspectives in order to understand children's language development and the importance of the social context for language acquisition (Säljö 2001; Vygotskij 1978). In this article we present a case study building on interviews with six preschool teachers in four kindergartens. Additionally, field notes are used to support the findings from the interviews.

**The Norwegian context**

Over the last few decades there has been a rapid growth in the Norwegian ECEC sector, and in 2015, 80.7% of one-to-three-year-old children were attending kindergarten, in contrast to 40.9 % in 2002 (Statistic Norway 2016). From the previous political focus on the quantity and development of universally accessible childcare, there has been a shift towards content and quality (Gulbrandsen and Eliassen 2013; Vassenden et al.)
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Norwegian national policy documents (Ministry of Education and Research 2013) and the Norwegian Framework Plan and guidelines (Directorate for Education and Training 2015; Ministry of Education and Research 2011) emphasise the importance of early and good language stimulation, and that all children should experience a rich and varied language environment in kindergarten (Hansen and Alvestad 2015).

The Norwegian Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens is an integrated play-based curriculum promoting a holistic approach to learning (Lohmander et al. 2009; OECD 2006). It provides guidelines for fundamental values, content and tasks for kindergartens, and gives staff, parents and supervisory authorities a framework for their work. It states that all kindergartens must be goal-oriented with regard to the children's development and learning, and that they have to stimulate children's linguistic and social competence (Ministry of Education and Research 2011). Linguistic competence is central in the overall content of the framework plan and Communication, language and text is one of the seven subject areas (Ministry of Education and Research 2011, pp. 21, 24). The framework plan emphasises the importance of early childhood as the fundamental period for the development of language, and states that providing all children with a rich and varied language environment is an important factor in language development. Systematic language stimulation is highlighted as an obligation for the kindergarten, and it must be based on knowledge, considered, planned, justified, organised, purposeful and coherent, according to the national guidelines (Hansen and Alvestad 2015).

Theory and research

Sociocultural theoretical perspectives focus on situated social practices and the use of
mediating tools/artefacts in learning and development processes. Vygotsky's work has contributed towards educational research and is widely used in this field. A central concept in his work is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) with the guidance of adults or more capable peers (Vygotskij 1978). Bruner emphasises the importance of social context in supporting and assisting children's development by using the scaffolding concept (Bruner 1996). Taking a Vygotskian approach, Bodrova and Leong (2007) argue for the use of language in a meaningful way in contexts that are relevant to children. In this study, language development is understood as a process that incorporates acquisition of components such as vocabulary, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. The development of these aspects allows children to successfully communicate and interact with adults and other children (Burger 2015; Hoff 2006).

**Language learning environment**

Studies show that good quality in ECEC has a significant impact on children's language development (Bauchmüller, Görtz, and Würtz 2011; Lekhal et al. 2011). The British Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study found associations between outcomes for children in terms of cognition and language, and effective pedagogical practices. The aspects of effective practices identified were adult-child verbal interactions with elements of 'sustained shared thinking' (SST), knowledge and understanding of the curriculum and knowledge of child development (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2003; Sylva et al. 2007). Siraj-Blatchford (2009) argues for the importance of the pedagogical sequence of 'modelling – progressive reduction of scaffolding – extension' to support children's learning and provide SST in early years. The importance of adult support was also evidenced by the Harvard Home-School Study where the quality of extended conversations with teachers was identified as being important for children's
long-term language and literacy development (Dickinson and Tabors 2001). In this study, the use of extended discourses, exposure to rare words and the classroom curriculum were dimensions of childcare experiences that had an impact on children’s development (Dickinson and Tabors 2001). These studies are mainly done with children above the age of three. With a focus on toddlers, Girolametto, Weitzman, and Greenberg’s (2003) study showed that the teacher’s responsiveness towards the use of interactive language stimulation techniques was positively related to children’s language usage. Interactive language stimulation techniques are measured by the staff’s encouragement of child-talk, how they follow children’s lead, how they adjust physically to the children’s level and encouragement of turn-taking and participation of all children (Girolametto, Weitzman, and Greenberg 2003). These findings are in line with research conducted by Melhuish and colleagues (1990), where language development was linked to the quality of care, particularly the aspects of communication and responsiveness (Melhuish et al. 1990). Burger (2015) sums up findings on effective language practices in five aspects: conversations and reading time with the use of open-ended questions; use of refined words such as focus words; label objects and target vocabulary in multiple meaningful contexts; multiple readings of a story and explanation of unfamiliar expressions; and interactive book reading with the use of concrete objects related to language development (Burger, 2015).

Assessment and planning

In the Norwegian context, research shows that language assessment tools are used extensively in kindergartens (Gulbrandsen and Eliassen 2013). The most common assessment tool is Tras (Tidlig registrering av språk i daglige samspill). Tras is an observation tool used to assess children’s language development over time and to identify children with language difficulties (Espenakk et al. 2011). In the processes of
educational planning in kindergartens, there is a complex relationship between plans, implementation and evaluation raising questions at many levels (Håberg 2016; Alvestad 2004a). It is important to consider the interaction and reciprocity between the chosen goals, the subject matter, methods and evaluation. Furthermore, frame factors and staff and children's presumptions should also be taken into consideration, along with the influence that national guidelines have on educational practices (Ministry of Education and Research 2011). The way in which this is achieved in educational practices in kindergartens may vary. Evaluation might further be seen as formative: a successive process to improve practice; or summative: as a final assessment (outcome) (Imsen 2009). Plans in Norwegian kindergartens are developed for shorter periods (weeks, months) or longer periods (annual plans) (Alvestad 2004b). Educational planning might be seen as a collective cooperation between staff as well as an individual process (for instance, planning undertaken by the preschool teacher concerning the group of children). The staff’s planning is an important connecting link between practice, local plans and the national curriculum.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was chosen to gain insight into the preschool teachers' perspectives on and experiences with educational language practices (Creswell 2013; Thomas 2011). A case study was used to develop an in-depth understanding of the research question: what characterises educational language practices as described by preschool teachers in kindergartens with high quality scores on ITERS-R? The study focused on four kindergartens with high score on ITERS-R subscale 'Listening and Talking', and the phenomenon under scrutiny is educational language practices. The case represents the preschool teachers’ perspectives on what they highlight as important in their educational work on supporting and promoting children's language development. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were seen as a relevant method for
recording the teachers' descriptions of their practices (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). In order to analyse and interpret the preschool teachers' descriptions a hermeneutical approach was used (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2008). The interviews were part of fieldwork also including observational data carried out by the first author in the period from April 2015 to January 2016. However, in this study we build on the interviews with the preschool teachers supported by the field notes from informal conversations and observations (Creswell 2013; Fetterman 2010). This is done due to the fact that in the Norwegian context the preschool teachers' are pedagogical leaders having the responsibility for quality in the educational work at their group.

Participants

The four kindergartens in this study were strategically selected from the BePro project sample (www.goban.no), based on high scores (five to seven/good to excellent) on the subscale 'Listening and Talking' on the ITERS-R (Harms, Cryer, and Clifford 2006). This subscale focuses on the language used and the staff's support of children's use and understanding of language. The exact ITERS-R scores were unknown to the researchers. The kindergartens varied on the following aspects: ownership (municipal and private), size (60–140 children), group sizes (9–14 children), preschool teachers per group (1–2) and geographical location (urban, rural) (see table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Children in group</th>
<th>Staff members per group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten A</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Preschool teacher 1, Preschool teacher 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten B</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Preschool teacher 3, Preschool teacher 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten C</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Preschool teacher 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten D</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Preschool teacher 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The six preschool teachers are all female, have experience ranging from two to more
than twenty years, and hold a bachelor's degree in the field of early childhood education. The age of the children in the groups ranged from 20 to 39 months.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were chosen to record each preschool teacher's perspectives and to ensure common focus in all the conversations (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). The questions (eight main questions in total) in the interview guide were open-ended and were based on four themes: (1) work on language, (2) educational planning, (3) tools for language assessment, and (4) professional competence. Questions asked included: 'How do you work with language stimulation in your group? Can you give some examples on this?' and 'Which assessment tools are you familiar with, and what are your experiences of using these tools?' The purpose of using open-ended questions in the guide was to allow the preschool teachers to elaborate on their experiences and provide opportunities for detailed answers (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). The interview guide was piloted and minor changes were made before the interviews were carried out face-to-face on-site in the kindergartens (by the first author). The participants were briefly informed about the project's focus prior to the interviews. The six preschool teachers participated with interest in the conversations, and gave rich descriptions of their educational language practices. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed immediately afterward.

**Analysis**

The transcriptions of the interviews were read through multiple times in search of patterns and common perspectives. In the first step, we started by reading the transcriptions in order to search for common topics and patterns. Statements regarding the preschool teachers' descriptions of their educational practices were marked.
second step, the process of analysis continued and resulted in the identification of five broad description areas. In this phase, theoretical concepts provided contributions to the description and interpretation. In the third step, the five descriptions areas were written out as broad categories, supported by quotations from the interviews and field notes. These are discussed further in relation to theory and research in seeking an answer to the research question. The process of analysis was based on categorising the empirical data, which is a core element in interpreting qualitative data (Creswell 2013; Maxwell 2013; Bogdan and Biklen 2007). Analysing the preschool teachers' descriptions involved an interpretation based on our understanding of the empirical data and theoretical perspectives. The coding and categorising is a result of an iterative process similar to that described as the hermeneutical circle (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2008). The categories are therefore constructed from the research question under scrutiny, and are to be seen as partly empirical and partly theoretical.

Quality in qualitative research

The research project was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD) in terms of confidentiality and anonymity and the data is stored securely. In the BePro project, ITERS-R was conducted in 206 child groups in 93 kindergartens. The four kindergartens in this study were selected from this sample to secure the anonymity of the kindergartens and staff. The participants were informed of their selection, asked to provide written consent and reassured that they could withdraw at any time (NESH 2010). Questions of validity and trustworthiness in qualitative studies are answered by describing the construction and interpretation of the empirical data (Creswell 2014; Silverman 2014). Furthermore, the findings from the interview data are corroborated with data from field notes (Creswell 2014). The fact that the analysis was carried out by
two researchers strengthens the reliability of the study as we see it. This is so because of
the constant discussion about patterns in the construction of the results (Creswell 2014;
Silverman 2014; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2008).

Findings and discussion

The findings are presented, described and discussed using quotations from the empirical
data on the five categories: (1) child-centred conversations, (2) rich and varied
vocabulary, (3) storytelling and book reading, (4) knowledge on children's
competences, and (5) integrated multidisciplinary curriculum. The preschool teachers
and kindergartens are identified using numbers and letters.

Child-centred conversations

The preschool teachers describe their work on language as something that happens in
everyday conversations and highlight the importance of the staff as language role
models. The learning environment is used to create space and provide content to
conversations with children. A teacher explains in relation to the question on their work
on language how a display of photos and pictures of familiar objects and artwork done
by the children are used to promote conversations during free play: 'Then it's easy for
the children to point and talk about the pictures displayed, and we [the staff] sit down
and talk with the children about these' (Preschool teacher 6). The preschool teachers
highlight that responding to children's attempt to communicate and using previous
familiar experiences encourages children to participate actively in conversations. A
teacher points to the importance of the quality of play and conversations in promoting
language learning for toddlers by participating and expanding on the children's initiative
and interests.
It started with free play in the morning, where the children took the initiative and invited me to participate in the play. It started with some animals, and then the play was extended with some children who found a Duplo board with a picture of a pond. "Who can be in the pound?" [the teacher asks]. "The ducks – yes the ducks can be there" [the children responded] and the play developed and went on for 45 minutes. This is how we promote free play – and how we see the relationship between the quality of play and language development' (Preschool teacher 3).

The preschool teachers focus on using opportunities to promote the children's language development by extending and building on conversations that occur during free play. A conversation taking place in a rural kindergarten shows how they build on children's interests and what they are familiar with. In the next case the preschool teacher encourages a child to lead a conversation, building on his experience to introduce and elaborate on a specific topic.

'During mealtime the preschool teacher (Preschool teacher 5) invites one child (two years old) to describe what he had seen on his way to kindergarten earlier that day. The teacher helps the child to remember by asking short and simple questions and gives him time to tell the story by himself. After the story she invites the other children to participate in the conversation and share their experiences on the topic by asking open questions to the group' (Field notes, kindergarten C).

In our interpretation the preschool teacher is using her contextual knowledge of the children's experiences to support their creation of narratives and use of decontextualised language (Odegaard, 2007). The use of extended discourses is important in construction of co-narratives with children in the age group one-to-three (Odegaard 2007). Extending child-initiated activities and a substantial amount of input from adults are common in high-quality kindergartens (Hoff 2006; Sylva 2004; Dickinson and Tabors 2001). This is in line with the concepts of ZPD and scaffolding where children are guided by more capable adults and peers (Vygotskij 1978; Bruner 1996) and guided play (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff 2013). Research shows that language stimulation in toddler
groups takes place during free play, where the adults participate and guide the children using a rich and varied contextualised language (Bjørnestad, Os, and Hegna 2015).

**Rich and contextualised vocabulary**

Vocabulary training in everyday activities and the importance of using a rich and varied vocabulary is described by the preschool teacher. Getting the children dressed for outdoor play is inevitable in Norwegian kindergartens, and is a situation often used when they are asked to describe their work on language. This teacher describes it this way:

>'When we are getting dressed we name the objects as we go along, for example hat, gloves. We ask questions such as "Where is the other hand?" The toddlers need new words and concepts, because they are in a period where they are learning new words all the time. I see that when we are talking to them, we repeat what they are saying; for example, if they say "my shoes", you repeat "Where are your shoes? Are they on the shelf, or on the floor or in your basket?" In this way, we are "bathing" the children in language' (Preschool teacher 5).

We interpret this as an example of vocabulary training, which is described as an important part of the work on language. The preschool teacher used the metaphor of bathing the children in language. She highlighted this as important because toddlers are developing their vocabulary rapidly during this period and should be introduced to a varied vocabulary. Furthermore, the concepts are to be used in meaningful contexts, such as in the example given above. During the fieldwork numerous instances were observed where the preschool teachers used everyday situations to work on vocabulary by following the children's initiative.

>'A child (two years old) and the preschool teacher (Preschool teacher 5) are looking out of the window. The teacher points at something the child is looking at and says: "That is a concrete lorry – a lorry they use in concrete work". The child replies:
"Concrete lorry, yes, a concrete lorry". The teacher explains that they are constructing the surface for the ground floor in the house, and therefore the lorry is there today' (Field notes, kindergarten C).

This is in line with Bodrova and Leong (2007), who stress the value of using language in meaningful contexts. The preschool teachers' focus on vocabulary training and verbalising is a strategy that Girolametto and Weitzman (2002) identified. They found that staff in toddler groups used a wide range of simple words and labels. The teachers are describing how they repeat and extend children's utterances when talking about the lorry or getting dressed (Siraj-Blatchford 2007). Research shows that adults' responsiveness and sensitiveness to children's interests and attempts to communicate contribute to language development (Snow 2014; Girolametto and Weitzman 2002).

**Storytelling and book reading**

In storytelling and book reading all the preschool teachers describe how they use different artefacts to help children get a better understanding of words and concepts. A popular story in Norwegian kindergartens is the *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and a preschool teacher explains:

'We use objects during storytelling in circle time so that a one- and two-year-old child can understand what a river and a bridge is when we are telling the story of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Preschool teacher 1).

Building on the story of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, another preschool teacher adapts it to the local context where sheep are used instead of goats because of the region's large amount of sheep farming (Field notes, kindergarten C). As we interpret it, the teachers' intentions are to support the children's concept knowledge and understanding by using concrete objects and local context in storytelling. Book reading is an activity valued by the preschool teachers, and they describe book reading which takes place during free
play, circle time and mealtime. The example given below describes how they use storytelling and book reading to give the children an opportunity to participate. This preschool teacher asks four boys who are wandering around during free play if they want to read a book.

'The preschool teacher starts reading the story *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*. She starts by asking the children: "What are we seeing here?" and one child responds: "water". The teacher follows up: "Yes, we see much water, but no people – where are all the people?"' (Field notes, kindergarten B).

We find these examples in line with Burger's (2015) description of interactive book reading and storytelling. In storytelling concrete objects are used to reinforce the book's vocabulary and multiple readings of a story with explanations of unfamiliar expressions. Burger argues that these strategies increase children's understanding and language development (Burger 2015). The description of book reading shows how the teachers involve the children in book reading by asking questions. The use of open-ended questions is part of an interactive reading strategy which provides children with opportunities to express themselves and can promote their language development (Mol, Bus, and de Jonge 2009).

**Knowledge on children's competences**

Having knowledge of the children's level of language competence is described as important by the preschool teachers. One of the teachers says that they: '… need to have knowledge of each child's language skills in order to know what to work on strengthening' (Preschool teacher 3). A common approach to obtain information on children's language level and development is the use of assessment tools. These are reported to be used extensively in Norwegian kindergartens (Gulbrandsen and Eliassen 2013). The preschool teachers in this study hold a positive view of using systematic
observation tools, such as Tras, in assessing children's language development. One of the preschool teachers argues for the use of Tras: 'You get an overview of the children's level of development and an indication of what areas we should focus on further as part of our work [on language]' (Preschool teacher 4). Another describes the use of the assessment tool in practice:

'… we [the staff] look at the results from Tras together and write down what we intend to work on during the next period. In this way the focus becomes more clear regarding how we will support the children's development later on' (Preschool teacher 6).

The preschool teacher describes that this way of using an assessment tool can lead to higher awareness and competence in language stimulation among staff. There is an agreement among the preschool teachers in this study that use of systematic observations can ensure that all children are seen and followed up. Furthermore, the teachers describe their use of assessment tools on a group level. Using assessment tools can give them knowledge on early language development and support their work on language in the group.

In this way the preschool teachers are using formative assessment as a successive process to improve their educational language practices (Imsen 2009). Taking the concept of ZPD, knowledge of children's level of development is necessary to support and guide the children's learning (Vygotskij 1978). Having knowledge of children's abilities, preschool teachers can challenge, scaffold and extend children's language competence. Results from a study on staff's use of Tras in Norwegian kindergartens showed that they became more aware of language and language stimulation in their everyday pedagogical work after using Tras (Lyngseth 2008). The use of systematic observation tools for assessing individual children has been discussed widely. Gjems (2010) discusses this
and concludes that the effect of using such tools is dependent on the preschool teacher’s knowledge and competence in this area.

**Integrated multidisciplinary curriculum**

All the preschool teachers in this study describe planning and the use of a curriculum as an important part of their educational language practices. The teachers relate the objectives in their work on local plans – such as annual plans, monthly plans and weekly plans – to the objectives in the framework plan. They especially mention annual and monthly plans in relation to questions on language learning, and the learning area 'Communication, language and text'. One preschool teacher emphasises the importance of coherence or a 'red-thread' between the planned activities and learning focus in their everyday practices:

> 'When we plan a theme such as "My House", we know what to do … for example, we went to each of the children's homes to take photos and also asked the parents to bring some photos of the family to kindergarten … then we use figures of a mother, father and sister in a planned history in circle time. … If we are working on "Numbers, space and shapes" we can implement this in the theme "My House" by using the house we have built with circles, squares and triangles as windows. In this way we can work with these concepts in more than just one planned activity … We think there should be a connecting red-thread in the use of different learning areas [from the framework plan]' (Preschool teacher 3).

An integrated, multidisciplinary approach is described, intertwining the learning areas 'Communication, language and text', 'Local community and society' and 'Numbers, spaces and shapes'. In their planning of a specific theme, in this case 'My House', they are connecting the planned activities to the intentions in the framework plan. In the quotation the teacher first explains how they plan different activities in relation to the monthly theme, and secondly points out how they implement relevant content from
different learning areas. Our interpretation is that this is an example of a play-based multidisciplinary approach to learning that we find in the Nordic social pedagogical tradition (Lohmander et al. 2009; OECD 2006).

The example above shows that the preschool teachers’ educational approach is characterised by integrating local context like the home environment, knowledge about the children’s language development and the relevant learning areas in the national framework plan in circle time activities. Accordingly, their daily work on educational language practices integrates local contexts and the national curriculum. As we see it they find their own way to implement the framework plan in this complex environment (Alvestad 2004b).

This is in line with the EPPE study where the preschool teacher's knowledge and understanding of the curriculum was a central component in high-quality ECEC institutions. In planning, the most effective teachers implemented the part of the curriculum most relevant for supporting the children in the group (Sylva et al. 2010). In a small-scale study, Alvestad (2004a) shows to a complexity in the realisation of the intentions of the national curriculum, and diversity in educational strategies.

**Summary and some final thoughts**

Educational language practices as described by preschool teachers in kindergartens with high quality scores on ITERS-R is as a *holistic dialogical approach*, according to our analysis. Our findings will be summarised in five main aspects:

- Staff are responsive and sensitive to children's attempt to communicate.
- Work on language is contextualised both in adult-led formal situations and child-initiated informal situations throughout the day.
• Use of situated and diverse strategies, including vocabulary training by verbalising actions, adding words, introducing concepts, supporting and extending conversations, and storytelling with the use of objects and artefacts.

• Planning for learning is seen as important. Planning is described in relation to the national curricula and in relation to the teachers’ educational language practices and local plans.

• Flexible use of assessment tools, deployed at both individual and group level.

The preschool teachers interviewed from high-quality kindergarten child groups have an approach to support and promote children’s language development based on careful considerations about how to create a holistic and rich learning environment for the children. They value working with language stimulation in everyday activities with a child-centred approach.

Interestingly, these findings are in line with the criteria for a high score on the ITERS-R subscale ‘Listening and talking’ on the items helping children to understand language and use language and books (Harms, Cryer, and Clifford 2006). In this way, our study contributes to a kind of validation of the ITERS-R on this item. This study extends research on ECEC quality using environment rating scales with an in-depth study focusing on the preschool teachers’ perspectives. Additionally, this study broadens the focus of the subscale ‘Listening and talking’ by focusing on educational language practices in a broad sense in the Norwegian context; in other words, national curricula and guidelines are seen in relation to the preschool teachers’ local practices in their local work, planning and assessment. A holistic dialogical approach is in line with the intentions in the Framework plan for the content and task of kindergarten, where the content should be contextualised to the local conditions and adapted to each individual child and group of children (Ministry of Education and Research 2011). This study
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contributes to the discussion of how to develop high-quality educational language practices with one-to-three-year-old children in kindergartens. It shows that these preschool teachers show an awareness of working systematically in a holistic and multidisciplinary fashion to promote children's language development. In this way it also offers input to ECEC policy and practice in Norway and elsewhere.

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