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THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR: STORY READING AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY TOWARD ACHIEVING PROFICIENCY IN EFL IN VERY YOUNG LEARNERS*

Abstract

This article examines how the use of music, tangible objects, story-reading, hands-on activities, drama activities, and Readers Theater strategy can help very young learners to become proficient in English as a foreign language. The present study is based on an English lesson taking place in a kindergarten in Lower Austria. There were two target groups of three to six year old children, one consisting of 25 learners and one consisting of 24 learners. English as a second language was taught to them in a naturalistic way for the period of three years. The learners' language skills and communicative competence in English were assessed through three different oral tests during the lesson. The results of the tests proved that the learners had already acquired a high level of proficiency in EFL as a result of the effective teaching strategies used in their English program and were capable of acquiring new vocabulary and meanings during the current English lesson.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, very young learners, effective teaching strategies, hands-on activities, story reading, Readers Theater

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BARDZO GŁODNA GAŚIENICA: CZYTANIE OPOWIADAŃ JAKO SKUTECZNA STRATEGIA OSIĄGANIA BIEGŁOŚCI JĘZYKOWEJ U MAŁYCH DZIECI W PROCESIE NAUCZANIA JĘZYKA ANGIELSKIEGO JAKO JĘZYKA OBCEGO

Abstrakt

W tym artykule przeanalizowano, w jaki sposób korzystanie z muzyki, przedmiotów, czytania opowiadań, zajęć praktycznych, zajęć teatralnych i strategii teatru czytelników może pomóc bardzo młodym uczniom w opanowaniu języka angielskiego jako języka obcego. Niniejsze badanie opiera się na lekcji języka angielskiego odbywającej się w przedszkolu w Dolnej Austrii. Badano dwie grupy dzieci w wieku od trzech do sześciu lat, jedna składała się z 25 uczniów, a druga z 24 uczniów. Angielski jako drugi język był nauczany w sposób naturalistyczny przez okres trzech lat. Umiejętności językowe uczniów i kompetencje komunikacyjne w języku angielskim zostały ocenione podczas trzech różnych testów ustnych podczas lekcji. Wyniki testów udowodniły, że w wyniku stosowania skutecznych strategii nauczania w programie języka angielskiego, uczniowie osiągnęli wysoki poziom biegłości w nauce języka angielskiego, będąc w stanie przyswoić sobie nowe słownictwo i jego znaczenie podczas bieżącej lekcji.

Słowa kluczowe: angielski jako język obcy, nauczanie małych dzieci, skuteczne strategie nauczania, zajęcia praktyczne, czytanie opowiadań, teatr czytelników

INTRODUCTION

The ability of young learners to express themselves effectively and to increase their vocabulary depends to a large extent on confidence and self-esteem partially achieved by placing the learning in an active context (Hayes Karabowska 1984; Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2014). Teachers can promote academic language acquisition in English through providing hands-on, inquiry-based lessons to children who learn English as a foreign language (Lee & Buxton 2010). Use of creative movement, music, and drama within a natural language environment setting can greatly enhance learning a foreign language by very young learners (Isenberg Packer & Jalongo Renck 2014). Active learning, in a variety of forms, utilizes hands-on education and reinforces student competencies and motivation in addition to connecting with the natural sense of wonder and curiosity children experience (Armon & Morris 2008; Copple & Bredekamp 2009; Freeman et al. 2014; Hornáčková Klapicová & Reister 2019a).

Teachers may feel overwhelmed in thinking about how to incorporate a variety of instructional activities designed to support learning when working with children who learn English as a foreign language (Nabors & Edwards 2011). The focus of instruction being not only on the academic content but also on the language itself contributes to this challenge the teachers may face (Hornáčková Klapicová & Reister 2019b). Two ways to overcome this challenge are to build on what the children already know through scaffolding instruction (Turnbull et al. 2004) and to provide opportunities for the children who learn English as a foreign language to talk with one another mixing or combining the two languages (Short, Vogt & Echevarria 2011). Children must use language in order to learn language

(Coleman & Goldenberg 2010). In addition, use of visual demonstrations, explanations in simple English, and allowing children to talk with one another informally as they complete a task while the child learning English as a foreign language receives the chance to practice basic vocabulary words with his or her English-speaking “buddy” can lead to successful acquisition of English as a foreign language (Hansen-Thomas 2008; Nabors & Edwards 2011).

Understanding and mastery of content can be much richer and make a deeper impact on children when teachers provide children learning English as a foreign language with multiple ways to communicate with one another and to manipulate the learning material (Armon & Morris 2008; Hornáčková Klapicová & Reister 2019a). Teaching strategies that allowed for this interaction with the material to occur in the lesson that is the focus of this article included: use of visual aids (including costumes or clothing related to the vocabulary, such as, wings of a butterfly or a headband with small butterflies on it), reading stories aloud, discussing the events presented in the story, acting out parts of the story by incorporating role-playing in reenacting what was presented by the story or the teacher, incorporating songs, and Total Physical Response activities (Armon & Morris 2008; Pray & Monhardt 2009; Short, Vogt, & Echevarria 2011; Vacca, Vacca & Mraz 2014).

During this lesson, the learners were also able to work with a teaching strategy that was loosely based on Readers Theatre that promoted student comprehension and revision of the information presented to them through engaging them in acting out parts of the story. Readers Theatre is a teaching strategy that typically focuses on developing reading fluency. This is due to the strategy involving children in working on their oral reading skills through reading aloud scripts that are based on the children’s book or literature that is the focus of the lesson. When engaging in Readers Theatre, children are not expected to memorize the lines or act out the script but rather they are to read aloud the part or script with appropriate inflection, meaning, and facial expressions (Isenberg Packer & Jalongo Renck 2014; Prescott 2019). This teaching strategy of Readers Theatre was modified in that the teacher read aloud the script of the story in English while the children role-played the action as they comprehended the material.

Through these shared experiences within the described lesson, the children not only manipulated the academic content and practiced conversational skills with one another but they were also able to demonstrate and role-play what they learned from the story as they built relationships with one another (Nabors & Edwards 2011). This type of play in a natural way is extremely beneficial in addressing communication challenges between English speakers and speakers of other languages (Burton & Edwards 2006; Hornáčková Klapicová & Reister 2019b).

This building of relationships and establishing trust with one another leads to a classroom environment or atmosphere that is warm and inviting. Teachers who incorporate naturalistic teaching strategies geared toward young learners results

in being a pleasant space for learners and one that is enjoyable and relaxed, allows for the learners to feel safe, and enables learners to take risks in trying new things, such as role-playing what is read aloud in a story through a modified form of readers theatre. This sort of setting enhances the children's potential to acquire English in a natural, spontaneous, and stimulating manner while also hopefully decreasing any anxiety from the learning process on the part of the children (Hornáčková Klapicová, 2018; Hornáčková Klapicová & Reister 2019a). Another teaching strategy to incorporate in the classroom when teaching young children English as a foreign language is through the use of tangible items.

The present paper highlights some of the teaching techniques which were used during an English lesson in kindergarten with the aim to help children acquire the second language in a naturalistic and motivating way. The contextual background and settings in which the second language was acquired will be provided, so that readers may envision how they will carry out the strategies in their own practice with a focus on implementing a modified form of the Readers Theatre teaching strategy.

1. AIMS OF RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

The present paper is one of the outcomes of a longitudinal project carried out in a kindergarten in Lower Austria whose primary aim was to verify whether young learners between three and six years old are capable of acquiring English as a foreign language in a natural way, and achieve a certain degree of bilinguality (German-English) through their English lessons. Instruction took place once a week during the school year for the period of 45 minutes. There were two groups of learners, each consisted of 25 learners, who were three to six years old. The strategies used in the classroom were based on the communicative approach, taking into consideration the age of the learners and their potential to acquire another language naturally and with ease. Instruction was carried out by native and near-native speakers of English. The instructors made use of various techniques and highly motivating teaching strategies, which included the use of authentic language through a great number of visual aids (real objects and pictures), auditory aids, songs, rhymes, kinesthetic aids, Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, body movement activities, multi-sensory activities, hands-on inquiry instruction, stories (story reading and story-telling), role-plays, skits and drama activities, gestures, facial expressions, social and emotional aids through active interaction with individual learners, use of the Story pyramid graphic organizer teaching strategy and Readers Theater strategy, while engaging the learners in all of the above activities and strategies, providing a relaxed and friendly learning atmosphere, eliminating fear and anxiety from the foreign language learning and communicating in the foreign language. The learners were immersed in a natural speaking environment, where English was used in meaningful contexts, providing them with real-life experiences. The results showing the effectiveness of the

above mentioned teaching strategies were obtained mainly through vocabulary tests, grammar and sentence-structure tests, listening comprehension tests, pronunciation tests, tests assessing the comprehension of meaning of words and speech acts (such as greetings, apologizing, saying thank you, making a request, asking a favor, etc.). The data was collected in the form of written notes and audio and video recordings during the English lessons. The findings disclosed that the learners had acquired quite a high level of proficiency in English by the end of the school year and demonstrated a certain degree of sequential bilingualism. Since the project in teaching English in a naturalistic way lasted for three years, there were learners in each of the two groups who attended the English lessons for more than a year (two years or three years). Those learners showed a higher level of proficiency in English and often served as helpers or assistants in communication to their younger peers.

2. STRATEGY AND ITS AIMS

The Very Hungry Caterpillar modified Readers Theatre strategy consists of reading aloud the script from the story and having the children role-play or act out what was shared in the story. The modified Readers Theatre incorporates introducing vocabulary, sequencing, rhyming, addition, role playing, actions, and the modified Readers Theatre teaching strategy. Through using the Readers Theatre teaching strategy, student comprehension and recall of the information presented to the learners was promoted. This occurred through engaging the learners in acting out the parts of the story. Readers Theatre is a teaching strategy that typically focuses on developing reading fluency. This is due to the strategy involving children in working on their oral reading skills through reading aloud scripts that are based on the children's book or literature. When engaging in Readers Theatre, the children are not expected to memorize the lines or act out the script but rather they are to read aloud the part or script with appropriate inflection, meaning, and facial expressions (Isenberg Packer & Jalongo Renck 2014; Prescott 2019). Engaging in Readers Theater promotes expression on the part of the learners, fosters communication with one another, and enhances social and pragmatic skills. This teaching strategy of Readers Theatre was modified in that the teacher read aloud the script of the story in English while the children role-played the action as they demonstrated comprehended the material.

The lesson began with the teacher introducing to the children the vocabulary and story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. There was one teacher of English who presented the lesson to the Kindergarteners. The vocabulary consisted of: hungry, caterpillar, egg, leaf, moon, sun, the names of the different kinds of fruits and other food that were mentioned in the story, cocoon, and butterfly.

Visual aids were used for most of the nouns presented in the story (Pictures 1-9). One student was invited to put on the costume of the butterfly's wings and a headband that had small butterflies on it. The teacher read *The Very Hungry*

Caterpillar, invited the learners to act out what was being read aloud, and provided comments on some of the passages contained in the book explaining new words in English as she read. The teacher also added additional information to enhance comprehension on the part of the learners.

Music was incorporated into the lesson through the singing of songs, such as, *Bread and butter, honey and jam, are you hungry, yes I am!* TPR activities were carried out in the lesson for the verbs from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* for actions like fly and eat.

After presenting *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to the learners, a discussion on food took place. Learners were asked to list what kind of food they enjoy eating and connections were made to the food that came up in the story. Reading this story allowed for review of English vocabulary for several different food items, some animals, terms from nature, numbers, and colors.

The visuals that were used for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* lesson were toys, clothing items, and pictures to show the learners visual representations of English vocabulary and signs. The visual representations consisted of colorful pictures of the other items from the above list in the *Needed Materials* section.

The first step in the instructional sequence was to teach or review the English words for hungry, caterpillar, egg, leaf, moon, sun, the names of the different kinds of fruits and other food that were mentioned in the story, cocoon, and butterfly. The second step was to read the book, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, starting with the story-reading from the children's book, using repetition, and acting out in the modified Readers Theatre what happened in the story.

The lesson concluded as the Kindergarteners completed the modified Readers Theatre teaching strategy with the teacher to assess the children's understanding of the story that was presented to them.

3. THE STORY

The Very Hungry Caterpillar is a children's book written by Eric Carle in 1969. It recounts the story of a caterpillar that hatched from its egg at the beginning of the story. The caterpillar realizes how hungry he is and decides to eat apples, pears, plums, strawberries, and oranges for an entire week by the end of which he is still hungry. The caterpillar goes on to eat cake, ice cream, pickles, swiss cheese, salami, lollipops, cherry pie, sausage, a cupcake, and a slice of watermelon which fills him to the point of a stomachache. The caterpillar's stomachache disappears when he eats through a green leaf the next day and he is all better. Once the caterpillar has had his fill of food he stays inside his cocoon until he breaks through and becomes a beautiful butterfly.

4. NEEDED MATERIALS

Pictures, toys, and other tangible items including *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* book, a caterpillar (a flowerpot and a toy), a butterfly, an egg, a cocoon, house, the moon, the sun, flowers, grass, a tree, candy, ice-cream, cake, pickles, swiss cheese, salami, lollipops, cherry pie, sausage, a cupcake, a slice of watermelon, apples, pears, plums, strawberries, and oranges, leaves (Pictures 1-9).

5. PROCEDURE

5.1. Pre-reading activities

In order to introduce the main character and the plot to the learners, various visual aids (Pictures 2-8) and interactive activities were performed before the actual reading of the story took place. The learners were invited to discuss the names, shape, color, taste, size, number, etc. of the different objects used as visual aids during the lesson. Just like what the caterpillar eats in the book, the learners were asked to classify which foods are fruits, vegetables, liquids, and sweets. Learners were also asked to identify those foods which they thought were healthy and those which were not so healthy. The learners learned that the caterpillar in the story ate too fast and too much, which made his stomach hurt. They also learned that they should take time to eat slowly and choose the healthy foods more often. The following nouns, adjectives and verbs present in the story were also reviewed and practiced during the pre-reading activities: *days of the week (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday), eat-ate, hungry, sun, moon, house, egg, cocoon, morning, feel better, big, small, fat, slow, fast, hole, push, hurt, stomach, stomachache, butterfly.*

5.2. Story reading

After the introductory activities, which helped the learners acquire and practice old and new vocabulary and meaning, the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* was read to the learners. The illustrations were showed to the learners as the story was being read and different visual aids were also used to enhance listening comprehension (including costumes or clothing that could be worn that related to the vocabulary, such as, wings of a butterfly or a headband with small butterflies on it). Individual learners were invited to act out parts of the story by incorporating role-playing in reenacting what was presented by the story.

5.3. Post-reading activities

After reading the book, the teacher discussed the events that occurred in the story with the learners. The learners were then asked to complete three different listening comprehension tests. In order to provide accurate answers, the learners needed to recall information and display their knowledge and successful listening comprehension.

6. TESTING

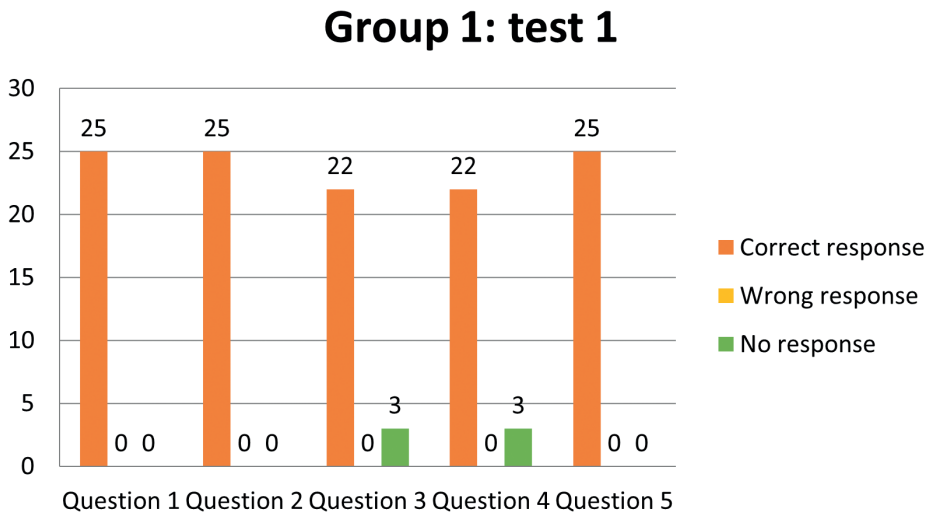
The following listening comprehension tests were applied to measure the learners' understanding of meaning of new (and old) vocabulary, listening skills, speaking skills, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence in English as a foreign language. The tests were given to 25 learners in Group 1 and to 24 learners in Group 2.

6.1. Test 1

In Test 1, learners were asked to answer six questions about the main character and plot.

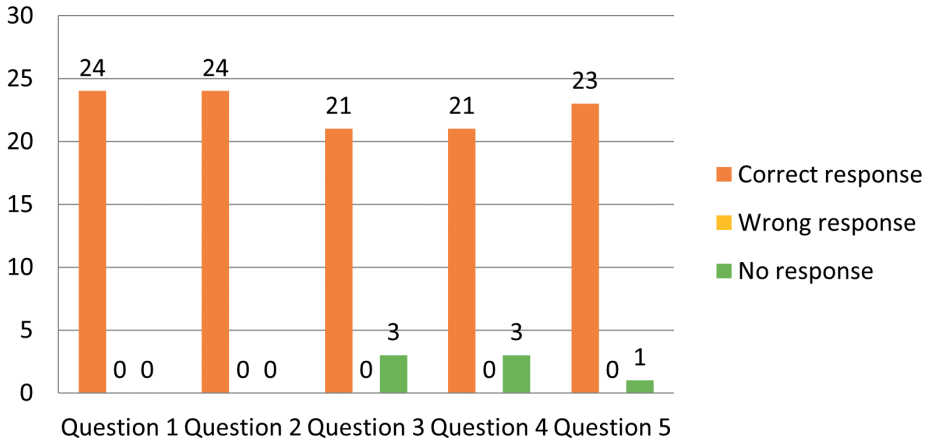
1. Who is the main character in story?
2. What did the caterpillar eat?
3. What happened to the caterpillar after he ate so much food?
4. What did the caterpillar eat that made him feel better?
5. What became of the caterpillar at the end of the story?

Graph 1



Graph 2
6.2. Test 2

Group 2: test 1

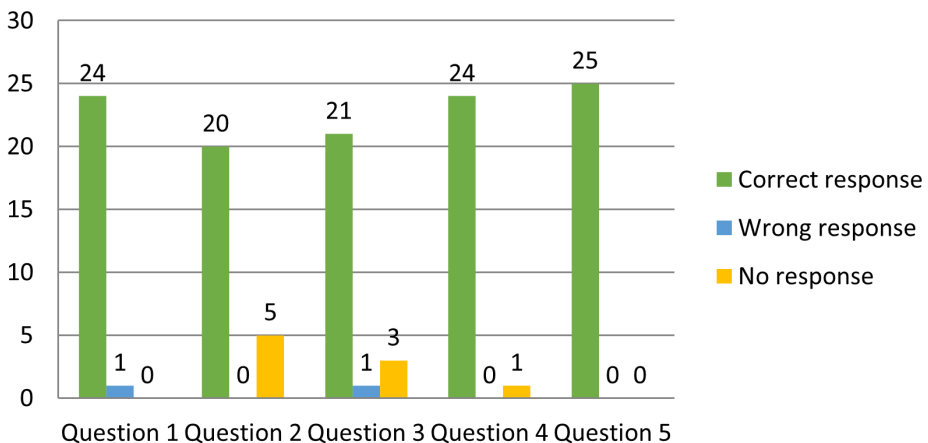


In Test 2, the learners were supposed to provide the appropriate word(s) to finish the sentences.

1. The caterpillar was very.... (hungry).
2. The Swiss cheese had... (holes) inside.
3. On Sunday, the caterpillar ate through one nice green...(leaf).
4. The caterpillar built a small...(house).
5. Then he nibbled a hole in the cocoon, pushed his way out, and he was a beautiful...(butterfly).

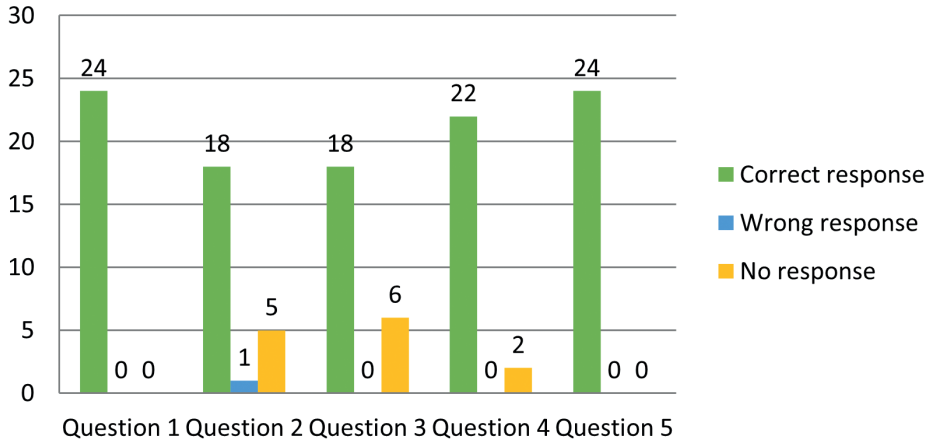
Graph 3

Group 1: test 2



Graph 4

Group 2: test 2



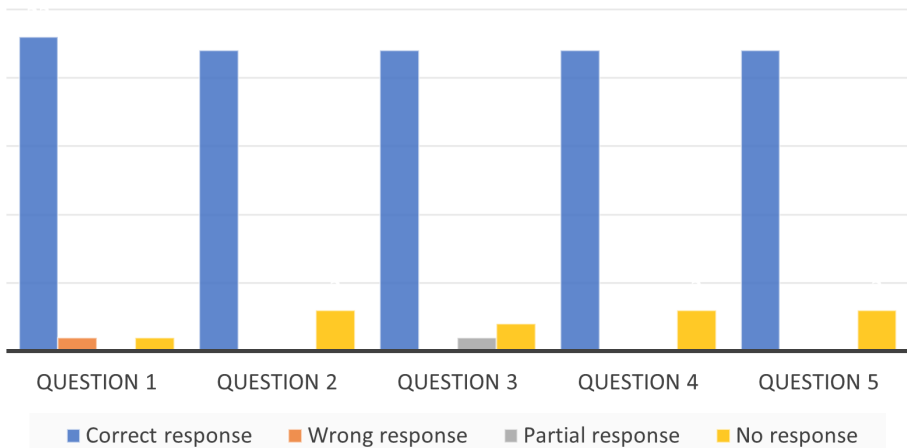
6.3. Test 3

In Test 3, the learners were asked to provide the appropriate antonym.

1. Was the caterpillar’s egg big or small? (small)
2. Is watermelon healthy or unhealthy? (healthy)
3. Is ice-cream warm or cold? (cold)
4. Is candy sweet or sour? (sweet)
5. Is cake hard or soft? (soft)

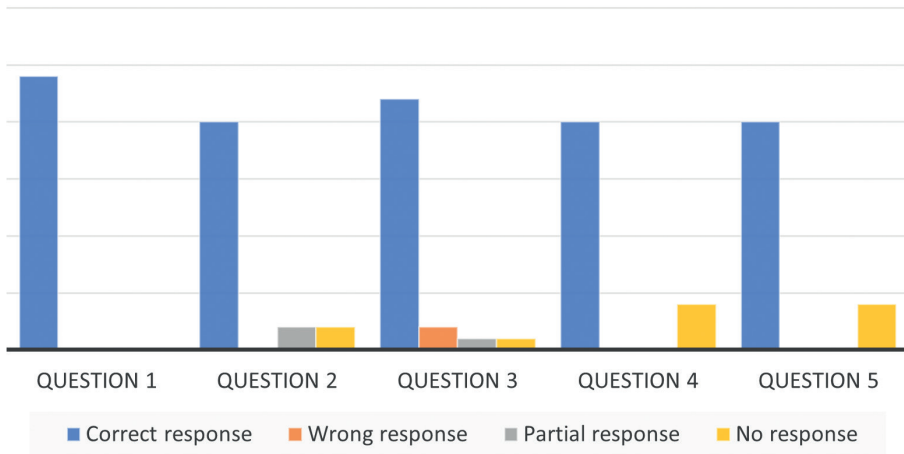
Graph 5

Group 1: test 3



Graph 6

Group 2: test 3



7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In Group 1, 25 learners out of 25 scored 100% on Questions 1, 2, and 5 in Test 1. 22 learners provided correct answers on Questions 3 and 4 in Test 2, while two learners did not provide any answers. In Group 2, 24 learners out of 24 scored 100% on Questions 1 and 2 in Test 1. 21 learners provided appropriate answers to Questions 3 and 4 on Test 1 and 23 learners provided appropriate answers to Question 5 on Test 1. Three learners provided no answers to Questions 3 and 4 on Test 1 and 1 learner provided no answer on Question 5 on Test 1.

In Group 1, 24 learners out of 25 provided appropriate answers to Question 1 on Test 2. One learner provided a wrong answer. 20 learners provided appropriate answers to Question 2 on Test 2, while 5 learners provided no answers. 21 learners provided appropriate answers to Question 3 on Test 2, while 1 learner provided an incorrect answer and 2 learners provided no answers. 24 learners provided correct answers to Question 4 on Test 2, one learner provided no response. All 25 learners scored 100% on Question 5 on Test 2.

In Group 2, 24 out of 24 learners scored 100% on Question 1 on Test 1. 18 learners provided accurate answers to Question 2 on Test 2, 1 learner provided an inaccurate answer and 5 students provided no answers. 18 learners provided accurate answers to Question 3 on Test 2, 6 learners provided no answer. 22 learners provided correct answers to Question 4, 2 learners provided no answer. All 24 learners scored 100% on Question 5 on Test 2.

In Group 1, 23 learners out of 25 provided accurate answers to Question 1 on Test 3. 22 learners provided correct answers to Question 2 on Test 3, 3 learners

provided incorrect answers. 22 learners provided accurate answers to Question 3 on Test 3, 1 learner provided an incorrect answer and 2 learners provided no answer. 22 learners provided appropriate answers to Question 4 on Test 3, 3 learners provided no answers. 22 learners provided correct answers on Question 5 on Test 3, 3 learners provided no answer.

In Group 2, 24 learners out of 24 scored 100% on Question 1 on Test 3. 20 learners provided accurate answers to Question 2 on Test 3, 2 learners provided incorrect answers and 2 learners provided no answers. 22 learners provided accurate answers to Question 3 on Test 3, 2 learners provided wrong answers, 1 learner provided a partially correct answer, and 1 learner provided no answer. 20 learners provided correct answers to Questions 4 and 5 on Test 3, 4 learners provided no answers to these questions.

In general, the results of Test 1, 2, and 3 show the high level of listening comprehension skills of the learners in both Group 1 and Group 2. The reason why some of the learners did not provide answers to some of the questions was mainly because they were the youngest members of the group (3 years old) and did not have as much exposure to English as their peers had had. Another reason for not providing the appropriate answers was that the vocabulary item tested on the test was part of new vocabulary. Wrong answers provided in some of the cases were a result of misunderstanding the question (e.g., providing the color instead of the size of the object). Partially correct answers were a result of German interference, mostly providing the appropriate answer in the German language.

The high scores on the tests are undoubtedly due to the teaching techniques used during the English lesson. The use of visual aids, TPR activities, motions, songs, story-reading, drama activities, interactive role-plays, authentic language, real-life experiences, catchy rhymes, inquiry based seeing-hearing-doing activities, hands-on activities, motivational activities, connectedness to the world, substantive conversation, implementing the modified Readers Theatre teaching strategy, use of the strategy of spiral curriculum as well as providing a relaxed and exciting learning environment are methods and principles which were implemented into the learning process. This occurred not only during the current lesson but also throughout the whole time of research with the aim to enhance learning and to provide learners with a positive experience from learning a foreign language.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined how the use of a modified Readers Theatre teaching strategy, songs, tangible items, and visuals may help very young learners who are learning a foreign language to acquire communicative skills. The current study is an outcome of an English lesson carried out in a kindergarten in Lower Austria, which incorporated hands-on inquiry-based instruction through the form of a modified Readers Theatre teaching strategy. The aim of the lesson was to teach

and practice new and old vocabulary, meaning, and structures of English as a foreign language with the use of the communicative approach. At the same time, the learners had the opportunity to improve their language skills, social skills, communicative skills, and strategic competence. Assessment was done through a number of oral tests. The results of the tests showed a very high competence of the learners in EFL. This was due to the effective teaching strategies used during the English lesson and to the learners' prior knowledge of English. The fact that the learners did not realize that they were being tested helped decrease any anxiety or stress in the learners while providing their answers to the tests.

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Appendix



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5



Picture 6



Picture 7



Picture 9



Picture 9