YOUNG LEARNERS´ ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND MOTIVATION THROUGH THE USE OF A PUPPET[i]

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Abstract:

A worldwide trend nowadays is to teach English at an early age. However, teaching this language to young learners is a real challenge. Teachers need special training and suitable methodologies to engage these active learners. In Chile, English language teaching starts as a compulsory school subject with 10-year-old students. This is not an easy task in the Chilean EFL classroom as few universities offer training programs or minors to teach English at the primary or preschool levels. The following study focuses on developing a group of young learners´ speaking skill through the use of a puppet created by the English teacher. The experience takes place in a public school in Chile. It is a qualitative descriptive study. The puppet called Simon plays an active role in all the English lessons interacting constantly with the children. As a result, , it can be concluded that the use of puppetry in the EFL classroom effectively helped young learners to become more confident when they face the learning of a new language, encouraged them to speak in English and facilitated the teacher's interaction with students, creating a suitable emotional environment that promoted the learning of a foreign language.

Keywords: puppet; young learners; speaking skill; interaction

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1. Introduction

Teaching English at an early age brings a number of benefits because young learners have more chances to learn a new language and they have more time available to practice. They have the chance to understand other foreign cultures and to become more tolerant to different viewpoints (Singleton, 2003). Another advantage that can be highlighted about learning a new language while being young is the fact that young learners become more fluent in the language and acquire a better pronunciation as they are not aware about grammatical features but they are more focused on speaking (Read, 2003).

The teaching of English in Chile is a compulsory school subject for all 10-year-old students up to 17 years old, when they finish high school. As in our country there is a lack of qualified teachers to teach younger learners at the preschool and primary school levels, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) has defined a proposal to teach English, which aims at developing specific language skills among students to make them speak in the target language (Curriculum en Línea, 2017). These guidelines are meant to help English teachers to plan their lessons for young learners and achieve the expected learning outcomes; however, it is not a compulsory program. Each school is free to work with these guidelines at these levels and use the resources available, provided by the government. According to an article (Educarchile.cl, 2017) these guidelines were created due to a growing demand of teaching English as a foreign language in the early stages.

Even though this initiative has not come to solve the problem of teaching English at an early age in Chilean schools, it has been a great help for teachers who work with young learners. In preschool and primary levels, there is an important gap regarding the learning of a foreign language, especially in public education, where the teachers are not able to plan suitable lessons with appropriate learning resources to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. In general terms, Chilean Higher Education undergraduates either get a degree as teachers of English for teaching in secondary schools or a degree to become a Primary teacher or a Preschool teacher, without any specific major in English. There are only a few higher institutions offering programs to teach English at lower level students. This means that those teachers who decide to face the challenge of teaching young learners must look for continuing education programs or different training programs to get the necessary competence and knowledge required for teaching the language at these levels.

The following study addresses the problem of teaching younger learners by integrating in the English lessons a puppet, considered as a valuable teaching aid that may help students firstly to develop their speaking skill and secondly, it is a great help for them to overcome the language barrier and feel comfortable and confident. This study also shows the students' perception about the interaction they achieved with the puppet. According to a research conducted by Lepley (2001), the use of a puppet has a positive impact upon students' participation. Korosec (2013, p.502) states that "*for a shy child the puppet represents protection and enables a more spontaneous sense of inclusion*".

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching English to young learners

Nowadays, the learning of a foreign language at an early age has several cognitive benefits. As far as we know, the brain capacity and children's brain flexibility are not a secret; the plasticity they have allows them to learn whatever they want to because the earlier a child begins to learn a second language, the better results he will get.

When we talk about young learners, we need to be specific about them, in terms of knowing who they are and what we aim to accomplish with them. According to McKay (2006), young learners are children between 5 and 12 years old who are learning a foreign or second language. One of the most important characteristics of young learners is the fact that they have the ability to become "*competent speakers of a new language with remarkable facility, provided they get enough exposure to it*" (Harmer, 2007, p.15). What is expected of English learners in general is to use the language communicatively, more over in children who are the ones with inherent abilities for this.

"*Spoken interactions for young learners become the medium through which language is encountered, understood, practiced and learnt*" (Cameron, 2001, p.18). Young learners love to play, and most of the things they learn at this stage is actually through games. Language games add fun and variety to conversation sessions. In addition, games are especially refreshing after grammar activities and are a wonderful activity to break the routine of classroom drills by providing relaxation while remaining within the framework of language learning.

2.2 The use of puppets in the EFL classroom and its benefits

The strength of using puppets lies in the ability they have to move and speak. Through these human features they are able to elicit information from children who might see themselves reflected in the puppets. The use of puppets makes it possible to communicate with a wide age range of diverse cultures and various language registers and they have the capacity to exert some influence upon children who are considered "*hard to reach*" in the usual manner (Remer and Tzuriel, 2015). Puppets help children express their feelings and thoughts freely, without any guilt or fear, free from inhibition (Aronoff, 2005). Additionally, puppets have the ability to encourage young learners through imaginary play to express themselves during free play (Lipoff, 2011).

Puppets used in an educative environment are considered as an effective resource with young learners who are learning a foreign or second language because they integrate all the major disciplines related to child development such as perceptions, comprehension, movements, coordination and integration with the environment, speech and narration (Korosec, 2013). Very young learners feel more relaxed and motivated when puppets are being used in lessons because the 'affective filter', which blocks learning according to Krashen, might get reduced (Krashen, 1981). Using puppets stimulates learning, builds self-confidence and provide the opportunity to learn communicative skills at an early age (Brezigar, 2010).

"Exposing children to the use of puppets promotes the development of spoken interaction skills. When children focus their attention on puppets, they are unaware of the fact that they are actually practicing a foreign language" (Toledo, 2016, p.8). Speaking is a key skill among young learners and in the foreign language curricula due to the fact that they have a natural ability to learn from natural experiences, develop their social-awareness, and become competent speakers of a foreign language. When very young learners focus their attention on puppets, they are unaware of the fact that they are actually practicing a foreign language.

In the study carried out by Toledo it is mentioned that puppets allow teachers to create contexts where children can use their curiosity and imagination to take part in oral production activities, which will build on their confidence and teach them to interact with others at an early age (2016, p.13). According to Diyani (2011) other benefits, puppets offer are the following: a) creative skill development, b) family relationship improvement, c) language development, d) social skills development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Type of study

The following study corresponds to a qualitative descriptive study, which is a comprehensive summarization in everyday terms, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals. *"Qualitative descriptive studies are the least "theoretical" of all of the qualitative approaches to research"* (Lambert and Lambert, 2012, p. 255). In the following research, a group of young learners from a school located in Chile, were observed in their English lessons (six lessons in all) for a period of two months. The data gathered was focused specifically on analyzing the students´ level of interaction they kept with a puppet called Simon, who helped them to speak English. This puppet was created by the English teacher to engage the learners in the lesson and enhance their speaking skill in the foreign language.

3.2 Participants

The sample was made up of 32 young learners, 17 boys and 15 girls, all of them in an age range between 5 and 6 years old. They all belonged to a public school located in Chile. As the school had a project of integration and inclusion, some of the students from the study had been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, a degree of Asperger and so forth, so the sample chosen for this research comprised a diverse group of learners. They had English lessons twice a week, 2 hours per week.

4. Data Tools and Analysis

In this descriptive study three different instruments were used to gather information about students´ speaking skill development and students´ opinions about their level of

interaction and motivation at the moment of interacting with Simon, the puppet used by the teacher.

4.1 Oral interviews in English

In this individual oral interview students had to interact face to face with Simon, the puppet. The oral interview last 3 minutes per student and was conducted by the English teacher supported by Simon. Compared to naked-eye observations, video recordings provide more specific details, more complete and more accurate images. In a technical sense, they are more reliable since they allow data analysis independent of the person who collects the data (Knoblauch, Schnettler, Raab, and Soeffner, 2006).

After the oral interviews ended, video recordings were transcribed in order to analyze the group of young learners´ English speaking skill and to observe the level of interaction they kept with the puppet in the communicative situations. The interview was simple, guided, and required students´ use of limited specific vocabulary learned in class and a command of elementary grammatical patterns to answer the questions related to food preferences, which were asked by Simon. (See Appendix 1). The key vocabulary taught in class was assessed and also the use of specific grammatical patterns such as: *I like, I dislike.*

4.2 Interview about students ´opinions of Simon, the puppet

An oral interview was used at the end of the intervention to gather information about students´ opinions towards the activities developed with Simon, the puppet and the level of interaction they kept. There were 4 open questions in the interview focused on the level of acceptance and motivation young learners exhibited after being in contact with the puppet. The questions were the following:

- Did you like the class?
- Did you like the class when Simon was present?
- What did you like the most about Simon?
- Do you prefer talking to your teacher or to Simon?

4.3 Students´ drawings about Simon, the puppet

Children´s drawings were used as a data tool once the lesson plans and the final speaking assessment were finished. "*The quality of teaching can be also seen through the perspective of students, using drawings from kids as an observation instrument. Drawings are a way of alternative expression especially suitable from children*" (Godoy Ossa et al., 2016). Barlow, Jolley and Hallam (2011) state that freehand drawings allow children to remember and express in detail what they are representing. Drawings were very useful in order to know how important the puppet was during the learning process.

Regarding data analysis used to shed light on students´ English speaking skill performance after interacting with the puppet in the English lesson, it was used percentage analysis as a statistical tool in the oral English interview. To assess

participants´ opinions about Simon, the puppet, a thematic analysis was applied based on the students´ answers provided in the oral interview.

5. Results Analysis and Interpretation

As this is a qualitative descriptive research, the information provided is mainly based on the observation and evidence gathered from the students' achievement in the English-speaking oral interview and their own perceptions about Simon, the puppet at the moment of interacting with him.

5.1 Students´ speaking skill achievement in terms of vocabulary mastery
The vocabulary taught in the lessons included 16 lexical items related to the FOOD unit. These words were selected considering the fact that they are part of the students´ everyday life, which they can easily recognize and produce. Five of these words were *cognates* (tomato, banana, broccoli, pizza, cookies). The communicative task about FOOD vocabulary recognition presented to students involved the participation of Simon, the puppet, who asked them to look at different pictures and say the food names orally in English, one by one as they were presented. Students´ answers are displayed in Table 1:

Table 1: Students´ speaking performance in terms of Food vocabulary mastery

Food vocabulary	Students' vocabulary accomplishment (12 students)	Percentage of vocabulary achievement	Criteria
cookies / tomato	12	100%	Outstanding
banana / broccoli / pizza	11	92%	Excellent
fish / milk	9	75%	Very good
chicken / carrot	8	67%	Good
eggs / apple	7	59%	Fair
juice / cereal	6	50%	Poor
bread	5	42%	Below expected
rice / meat	2	17%	Fail
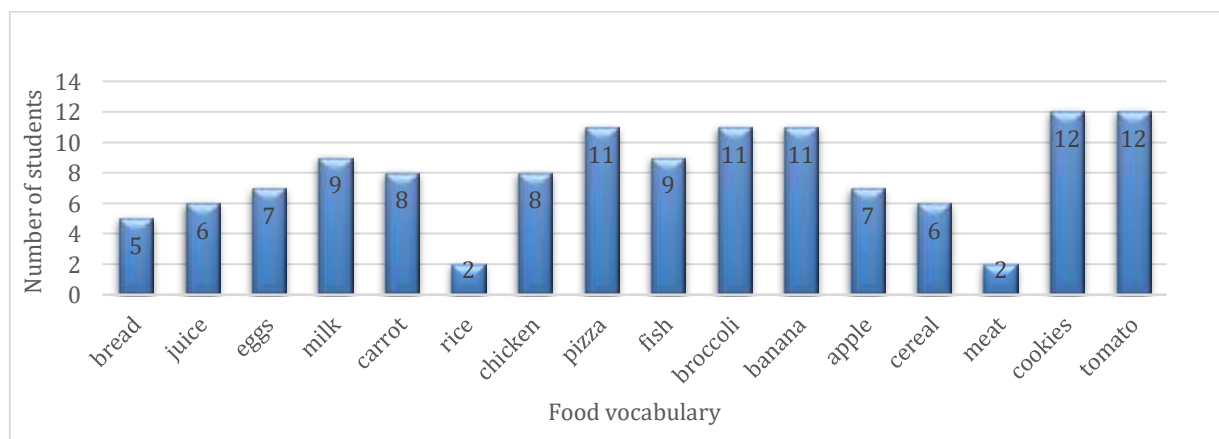
Graph 1: Students´ speaking performance in terms of Food vocabulary mastery

The results observed in Table 1 and Graph 1 show that the words these young learners were able to produce easily were *tomato and cookies*, both with a 100% of achievement. These two words are very similar in English and Spanish, in terms of pronunciation and spelling, and can be easily identified in common spoken language. In the case of the word *tomato*, as it is very similar to the word *tomate* in the Spanish language (cognate), students did not have any problem to produce it orally. |In the case of the word *cookies*, this word particularly was coined due to a well-known Chilean company (COSTA), where one of their products is a cookie named KUKY, so phonetically both words sound the same, even though they are written differently, which is not relevant since children at this level do not know how to write or read.

The three other lexical items which were also easy for the students to produce in English were: *banana, broccoli and pizza*. As these words are also cognates, they were probably easier to retain. Cognates *are pairs of words that sound alike and have the same meaning in two different languages* (Nemeth, 2017). According to Rivers and Temperley (1978, p.193) "*The aim of teaching cognates is to build learner's confidence very quickly*". Language learning becomes successful and meaningful, when teaching starts with what the students already know (Mugford, 2008). According to Mugford (2008), "*cognates break down language barriers and help learners to understand that a second language may not be that strange*". Holmes & Ramos (1993, p. 90) claim that cognates help students to "*become better guessers*" and improve vocabulary recognition and production strategies.

In terms of words that students experienced a little difficulty to produce them orally, it was found the words *fish, milk, chicken, carrot, eggs, apple* (67% in average). The pronunciation of these lexical items was difficult for these young learners because they were not familiar with them, they were not part of their day to day vernacular language, but since they had practiced them with Simon, and during the interview the puppet tried to elicit the words by playing a game with them, it was possible to achieve acceptable results from the children. The role of the puppet was extremely relevant in this stage of the process, particularly because he helped children to break the barrier of fear towards using a foreign language and fostered the relationship between the student and the teacher. The puppet was used as a psychological anchor to make children feel more relaxed and comfortable in the language class.

Lower percentages achieved by students were observed in the words *juice* and *cereal* (50%), in the word *bread* (42%) and the words with the lowest results were *meat* and *rice* (17%).

A possible explanation can be the fact that some of the pictures presented to students were a little bit confusing, since the images were not very clear, rather ambiguous, so in a way children tried to guess more than to recognize and produce the word. According to Piaget (2007), during the preoperational stage (from 2 to 7 years old) children are not yet able to conceptualize abstractly and need concrete physical situations. Maybe, the use of real objects (realia) would have made a difference in the results obtained.

Regarding young learners´ use of Spanish language in this first task, only 3 students out of 12 (25%) produced 2 or 3 words in Spanish. For example, S2 did it in the words *carrot, rice* and *apple,* S11 in the words *milk* and *meat* and S1 did it in the words *juice, eggs* and *rice.* In this specific part, although children produced words in Spanish, these three children demonstrated a very good level of interaction with Simon, the puppet; and in every moment, they kept talking to him because the relationship between them was more like a game than an assessment.

This explains the fact that in some occasions the students forgot to speak in English and interacted with him in Spanish.

5.2 Young learners´ oral interview results about food preferences.

In this task, very young learners took part in an oral interview conducted by Simon, the puppet, where he presented the pictures of each kind of food reviewed previously and the children had to name them first one by one, and after that they had to answer some questions related to their own preferences by using the structure *I LIKE* and *I DON'T LIKE*. In this part of the results, an analysis of the grammar structures "I like…" and "I don´t like…" is presented in terms of very young learners´ individual speaking performance. Results can be observed in Graph 2.
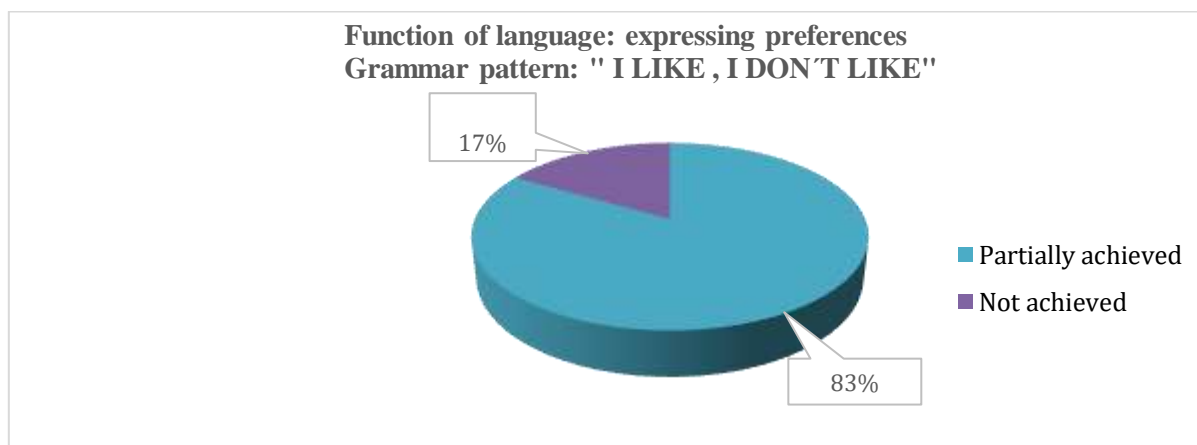
Graph 2: Students´ speaking skill performance in the oral interview

The two grammatical structures (I like, I don´t like) were modelled by Simon, the puppet, in first place, helped by the teacher, and both together taught the children how to use them, acting out a conversation where the teacher asked Simon about his preferences related to food, and he answered with "Yes, I like…" and "No, I don't like…", and then they swapped roles. In this part, children participated in the conversation, helping Simon to remember the vocabulary sometimes he forgot. Even though the group of students accomplished the task partially (83%) in the way that it was expected, they were able to create grammatical structures very similar to the ones expected. In the following transcript samples of the students´ interviews it can be observed what they were able to produce orally in English

A. Transcription N°1: Student N°1

Simon: *"fish! Do you like fish?"*
Student: ***"do like fish!"***
Simon: *"I also like fish! This one?"* (showing rice)
Student: *"Mmm, rous?"*
Teacher: *"rice! Do you like rice?*:
Student: *"***do like*** rice!"*

B. Transcription N°2: Student N°10

Simon: *"do you like chicken?"*
Student: (nods her head affirmatively)
Simon: *"I like chicken too! And do you like tomato?"*
Student: *"**like!**"*
Simon: *"you don't like?"*
Student: (nods her head negatively) *"**no like**"*

C. Transcription N°3: Student N° 11

Simon: *"I like bananas too, and do you like carrots?"*
Student: *"**I no like.**"*
Simon: *"I don't like carrots either, OK! Thank you Joaquín!"*

Regarding the use of Spanish language during the oral interview, in terms of grammar structures *I like, I don´t like* , nobody used this pattern in Spanish by saying "Me gusta" o " No me gusta", instead of that, body language played an important role during the interview since students used their heads or their hands trying to answer the questions asked by Simon. This simple body language showed that they were interested and committed to interact with Simon to keep communication; therefore, evidence proved that even though grammatical structures were important, the main objective was accomplished succesfully.

According to Bessie Dendrinos from University of Athens, Faculty of English Language and Literature, when teaching grammar structures to young learners, it is important to consider that "*children learn best by playing, singing, and using language in real situations and for fun, not by explanation*", and also "*they interpret meaning without necessarily understand the individual words because they learn indirectly rather than directly*". (Dendrinos, 2017 p.6)
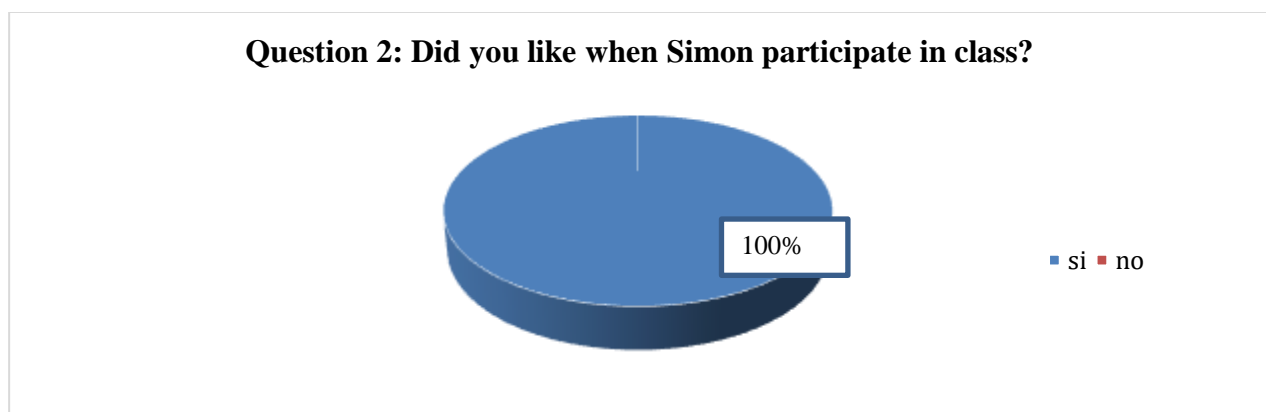
5.3 Students' opinions about Simon, the puppet

To complement the research, it was very important to know young learners' opinions about Simon, the puppet, which was assessed by using a short oral interview made up of 4 questions asked to students in Spanish. In the first question: ***Did you like the English lesson?*** 11 students answered affirmatively and only 1 student reported ***he didn't like Simon***. It is important to consider the fact that during this stage of children´s

development, sometimes their mood changed from one second to another, depending on the activities. Graph 3 shows students 'opinions.

Question 1: Did you like the English lesson?

8%

92%

■ si
■ no
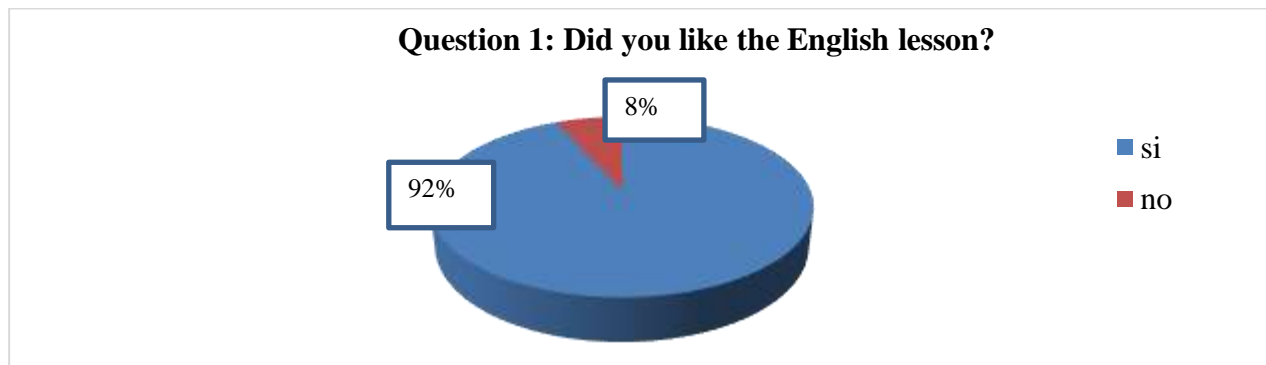
Graph 3: Students´ opinions about the English lesson

Regarding the second question asked to students : ***Did you like when Simon participate in class?"***, all the students reported they liked to interact with Simon.

Question 2: Did you like when Simon participate in class?

100%

■ si ■ no

Graph 4: Students´ opinions about having Simon participating in class

The third question was ***What did you like the most about Simon?*** The answers were divided into three main types:

a. Physical descriptions
In this item, the students reported opinions like: *the puppet´s clothes* and *their physical aspect*, for example *the hair and the clothes of the puppet*. Some of the sample answers were the followings:
- Student N°4: *"Su pelo" (his hair)*
- Student N°7: *"La ropa" (his clothes)*
- Student N°12: *"Me gusta la forma que tiene, porque es amarillo y tiene mucho pelo y su chaleco". (I like the shape he has, because he is yellow and has a lot of hair and his sweater)*

b. Personal qualities

In this item, the children reported that what they had liked the most about Simon was the fact that he traveled all around the world, and that he knew a lot of places and he had visited his friends. Since a video was presented at the beginning of the class, showing Simon travelling around the world, children started to create new settings and describing Simon's friends, like Mickey Mouse, the characters of Madagascar, which is a movie about animals, and also famous characters from books like Harry Potter and his classmates.

Students reported the following opinions:

- Student N°6: *"Lo divertido que es que él dice palabras"* (the funny thing is that he says words)
- Student N°9: *"Por que es divertido, porque nos enseña cosas y es divertido aprender"* (because he is funny, he teaches us things and learning is fun)
- Student N°3: *"Por que es divertido porque habla y juega con nosotros"* (because he is funny, he speaks and plays with us)

c. Actions performed by Simon: in this aspect, children reported that they liked Simon because he was funny, also because he talked to them in English and taught them new things in English.

Some students 'comments were the following:

- Student N°10: *"Porque él viaja, porque lo hace todo en ingles"* (because he travels, because he does everything in English)
- Student N°5: *"Que va a otros mundos, porque les enseña cosa de inglés"* (he goes to other worlds, because he teaches things in English)
- Student N°1: *"Que viaja a donde quiere, porque va a ver a sus amigos"* (he travels wherever he wants to, because he goes to visit his friends)

Graph 5 shows students 'percentages according to the three aspects identified.
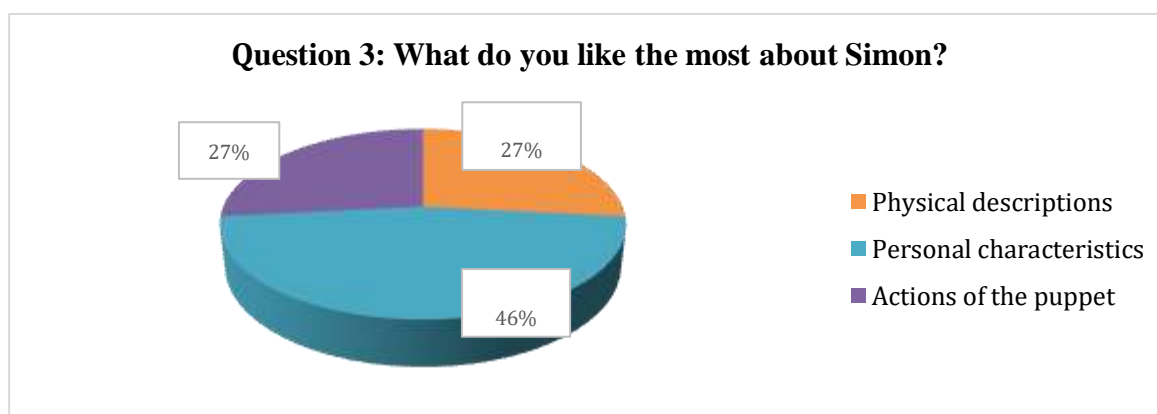
Graph 5: Aspects students highlighted about Simon, the puppet

During the early stages in childhood, children's thoughts are characterized by *animism*, which is "*the belief that plants, objects and natural things such as the weather have a living soul*" (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2010). They are attracted to dolls, perceive them as living creatures and attribute many different roles to them in playtime.

Children recognize dolls as a legitimate and natural part of their world (Yoeli, 2008). During the winter school break, the students were out of school for two weeks, and when they came back, Simon told them a story about the places he had visited and what he had done during the school break. This aspect was analyzed through the different students´ drawings they made. Some samples are provided to illustrate the children´s feelings towards Simon.
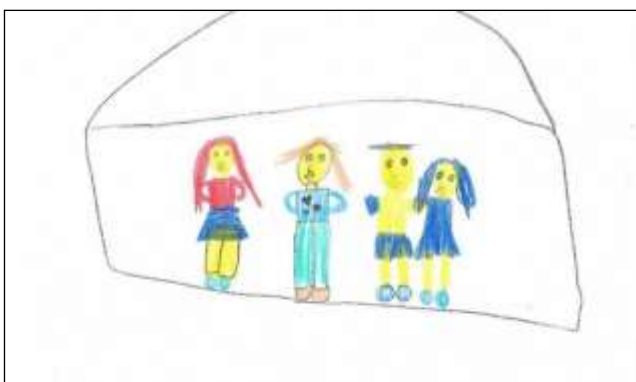
5.4 Students' drawings about Simon

Student N° 2
"This is Simon walking along the dessert because he travels all around the world"
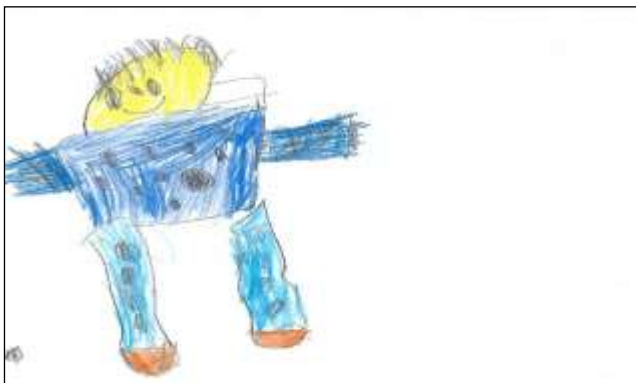
Student N°6
"Simon is very nice and I like his T-shirt with dots and his blue pants and his orange shoes"

Student N° 5
"This is Simon visiting his sister, his father and his mom because he loves his family very much".

Student N°11
"This is Simon sailing in the sea because he likes travelling and meeting new places".

The students´ drawings revealed that these young learners felt comfortable with Simon, since they saw him as a close friend, like their classmates, and the reality they created went far beyond, where they imagined more characters surrounding Simon. In general terms, all students liked the idea that Simon had traveled a lot, visiting new places and making new friends all around the world. The idea came from a power point presentation the teacher presented to students, where Simon showed them what he had done during the school break.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to observe the effectiveness a puppet called Simon may have in helping a group of young learners to develop their English-speaking skill. In first place, it can be concluded that learning a foreign language at an early age is crucial, since very young learners have the necessarily abilities to acquire it in a short period of time. In order to accomplish this goal, the use of a puppet plays a fundamental role, since it has got the ability to break the barriers between the teacher and the students, in order to give very young learners confidence to face a new language. It can change the climate of the classroom, and turn it into a playground more than a classroom.

Children at this stage of their learning process need concrete teaching; objects they can touch or see immediately; this is the reason why a puppet is indicated to work as a channel to approach young learners, because during this period, they feel a puppet as a peer, giving him human characteristics and qualities. In the present study the use of a puppet developed significantly the group of children´s English speaking skill, where in spite of the fact grammatical structures were not fully accomplished in a 100%, communicative skills development reached a very high level of achievement and students tried to keep communication with the puppet at every single moment in the different tasks, by using spoken or body language.

In terms of the children's perception towards Simon, the puppet, it can be said that they created a truly emotional connection with the puppet, where they saw Simon as a

true friend and not as an inanimate object. They went even beyond by attributing him human qualities and imagining more than what they could actually see in the classroom, because young learners created a family, places and experiences about the puppet. All the previous aspects mentioned, can help teachers to engage learners and facilitate their work with a group of students in the foreign language classroom, which can be hard sometimes to deal with, especially if you don't have the adequate training, or the indicated tools and resources to do a suitable class oriented to young learners.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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