LITERACY OF COMMUNICATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: INVESTIGATING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN GREECE[i]

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Abstract:

This study explores the communication strategies employed by young children in early childhood education settings in Greece, as observed by educators. The research aims to understand how children utilize and adapt various communication styles within school environments. The study involved 44 participants, including undergraduate students majoring in Early Childhood Education and Care, as well as early childhood educators. Data was collected using a comprehensive questionnaire that examined different types of communication strategies and the specific contexts in which these strategies are used. Analysis of the data revealed that educators employ diverse techniques, such as incorporating music and encouraging role-playing games, to enhance children's communication skills. Conversely, children utilize a range of strategies to engage attention and interact effectively with peers and educators. These findings underscore the dynamic interplay between educator-facilitated activities and children's innate communication efforts, offering insights into improving communicative literacy in early education.

Keywords: communication strategies, early childhood education, educator observations, interaction, communication skills, educational environment, teaching methods

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1. Introduction

Strong communication skills play a vital role in the holistic development of young children in educational settings (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Early childhood education is essential for the development of children's communication skills, enabling them to express themselves, comprehend others, and handle social interactions effectively (Justice & Kaderavek, 2002). The heart of this developmental process revolves around the concept of "Literacy of Communication," which encompasses a wide range of skills required for effective verbal, non-verbal, and written communication in early childhood (Hohmann, Weikart, & Epstein, 2008).

Recognizing and nurturing language and communication skills in early childhood is essential for effective communication (Hancock, 2014). It goes beyond the conventional definition of literacy to include a larger range of communication skills necessary for personal, academic, and social success (Gillen, 2014). Understanding the importance of excellent communication skills in early life requires prioritizing their development from the outset of language acquisition (Lonigan, Shanahan, & Cunningham, 2008). Research highlights the significance of developing communication skills early on since they have a significant influence on academic success, social competence, and emotional well-being (Bornstein, 2014; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014). Educators and caregivers may help young children become confident and eloquent communicators by creating a supportive and engaging environment and offering deliberate language development assistance. This lays the framework for ongoing success (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009).

2. Foundations of Literacy of Communication in Early Childhood

During early childhood, children go through a remarkable journey of communication development marked by significant milestones and achievements (Hoff, 2009). Understanding these fundamental aspects is crucial for educators and caregivers in creating supportive environments to promote communication development.

During the early years, there has been notable progress in communication skills, including speech, language, and social interaction (Rowe, 2012). During the early stages of a child's life, they experience different phases of development that are characterized by important milestones in their communication skills (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2008).

The process of language acquisition in early childhood is truly remarkable as children transition from babbling to forming meaningful speech (Kuhl, 2004). Initially, infants begin producing adorable sounds and exploring their vocal abilities, which lays the foundation for their language communication skills to develop (Gros-Louis, West, Goldstein, & King, 2006). As children enter the toddler years, they begin to develop their language skills by expressing their first words. Over time, their vocabulary expands as they are exposed to a wider range of language input. Caregivers have a vital role in

supporting children's language development through their responsive interactions (Tamis-LeMonda, Kuchirko, & Song, 2014).

Developing strong communication abilities relies on pre-literacy skills. These skills are essential for children to develop before they receive formal instruction in reading and writing (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). These skills encompass phonological awareness, which involves the capacity to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken language (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004). Furthermore, developing a diverse vocabulary is critical for improving one's capacity to communicate successfully. Children may develop their language abilities by being exposed to a wide range of linguistic stimuli (Hart & Risley, 1995). Furthermore, infants develop print awareness as they get acquainted with the rules of written language. This includes understanding the value of written language and being able to identify letters and words in their surroundings (Ehri, 2005).

Educators and caregivers may offer targeted assistance to early children by knowing the many phases of communication development, the language acquisition process, and the importance of pre-literacy abilities.

2.1 Communication Strategies as Components of Communication Literacy
Communication strategies are an important technique for increasing communication effectiveness (Papadopoulos, 2020; 2021a). They help to bridge the gap between expressive efforts and the language resources at our disposal (Kárpáti, 2017). Communication tactics may be found in a variety of sectors, including education, marketing, and information technology. When creating communication techniques, two criteria are given as crucial points: a) the issue, and b) consciousness.

The essence of inquiry is the identification and delineation of the issue, or problematization, which acts as the foundation for researchers to thoroughly evaluate communication tactics. Central to this undertaking is the need for scholars to identify and appreciate the underlying communication problem that speakers may face. However, the phrase itself remains ambiguously defined, allowing scholars to interpret it in order to define the outlines of communication strategy (Papadopoulos, 2020).

Dörnyei and Scott (1997) delineated communicative problems into three distinct categories. Firstly, Speaker Performance Problems encompass instances where the speaker perceives the necessity for compensatory measures due to encountered difficulties during speech delivery. Such challenges may manifest as linguistic errors or struggles in grasping meanings, prompting mechanisms of self-correction, self-processing, and reformulation. Secondly, Addressee Performance Problems pertain to scenarios wherein the speaker employs negotiation strategies to address issues arising during interaction with the interlocutor. Lastly, Processing Time Problems arise from the speaker's requirement for additional time to decode messages received from their interlocutors. Strategies within this domain commonly include hesitancy mechanisms, repetitions, and employment of filler phrases. Furthermore, Papadopoulos (2016) introduced an additional category termed "Achieving Communication Goal Problems." Within this classification, speakers endeavor to effectively communicate with their

interlocutors, comprehend meanings, and appropriately react to achieve specific communicative objectives, such as persuasion, justification, or expression of gratitude.

The second criterion, "consciousness," encapsulates a series of processes directed towards achieving a specific objective. However, akin to the ambiguity surrounding the term "problem," the concept of "consciousness" lacks clear delineation, permitting individual researchers to construe it according to their own understanding (Papadopoulos, 2020). Awareness, within this context, can be viewed through various lenses:

1) Consciousness as Awareness of the Problem: This perspective denotes the speaker's recognition and comprehension of a linguistic challenge or the realization that they are unable to adequately address their interlocutor's discourse, prompting the employment of communication strategies.

2) Consciousness as Intentionality: Here, consciousness entails the speaker's acknowledgment of the impending difficulties in their speech and the deliberate utilization of communication strategies to navigate these challenges.

3) Consciousness as Awareness of Strategy Use: At a certain juncture, the speaker becomes cognizant of their utilization of linguistic mechanisms to facilitate a seamless conversation with their interlocutor.

Thus, both the notion of "problem" and "consciousness" lack precise definitions within the scholarly discourse. Nevertheless, endeavours have been made to furnish researchers with guiding criteria to discern what qualifies as a communication strategy.

3. Method

3.1 Purpose of the Study
The present research examines the use of communication strategies by early childhood children based on observations made by their educators on a daily basis. Specifically, the study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

1) To investigate the extent to which early childhood children employ communication strategies in the context of daily learning and interaction.

2) To discuss the different types of communication strategies utilized by early childhood children.

3) To explore the extent to which educators promote the utilization and use of children's communication strategies during teaching and learning processes.

3.2 Sample
The study included 44 participants, comprising 25 undergraduate students majoring in Early Childhood Education and Care at the International University of Greece, and 19 early childhood educators. Convenience sampling was employed due to the small population, facilitating the researcher in identifying the key elements of the issue requiring further investigation. A key characteristic of the participants is their role as early childhood educators and prospective educators.
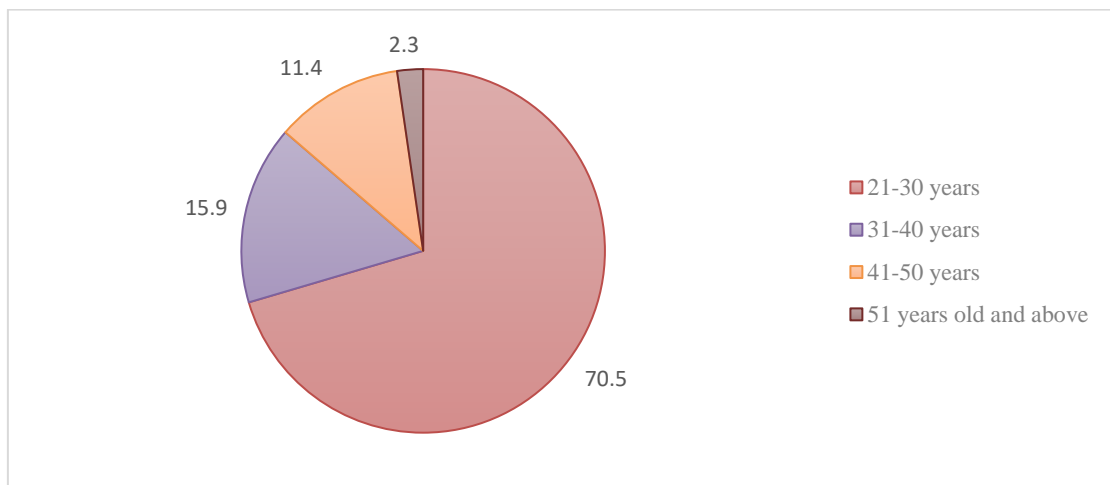
More specifically, the study involved 25 undergraduate students and 19 early childhood educators. Specifically, 81.8% were female, 15.8% were male, and 2.3% preferred not to disclose their gender.
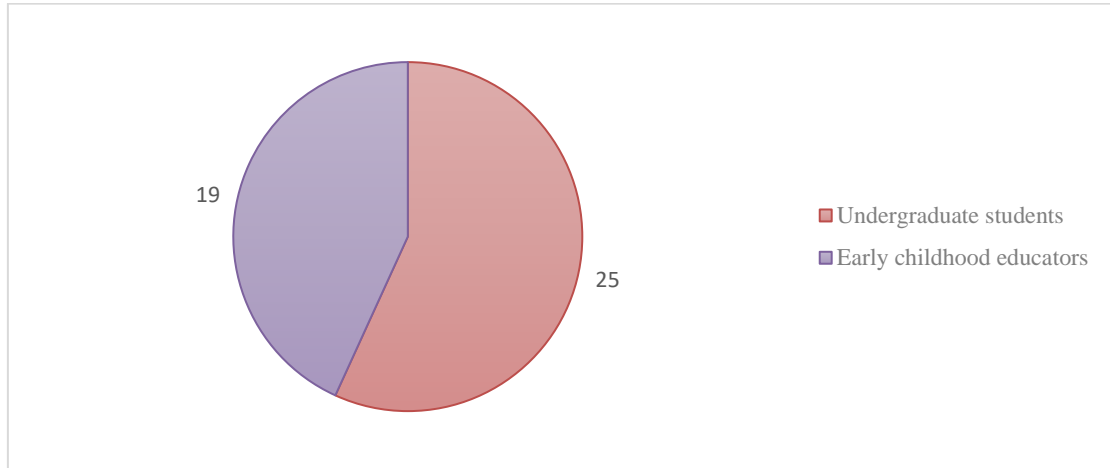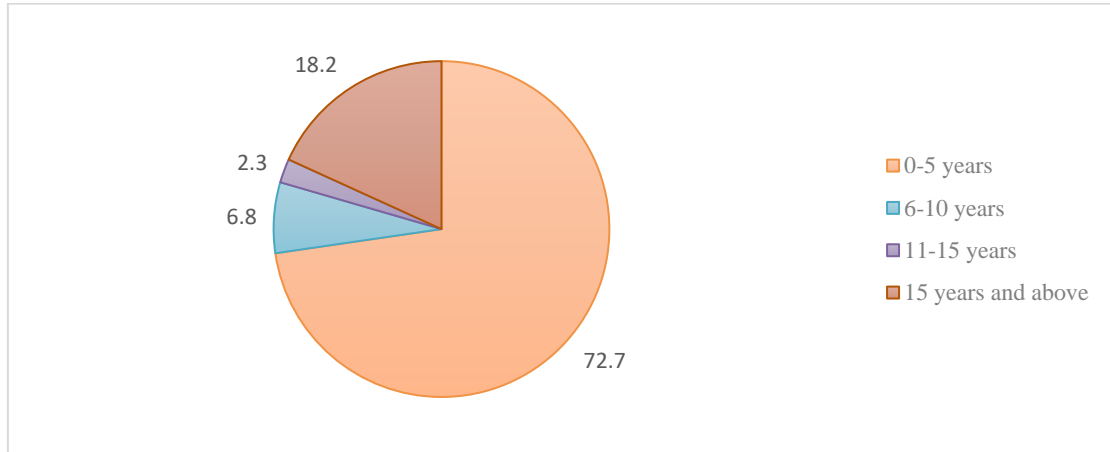

Graph 1: Status of the participant
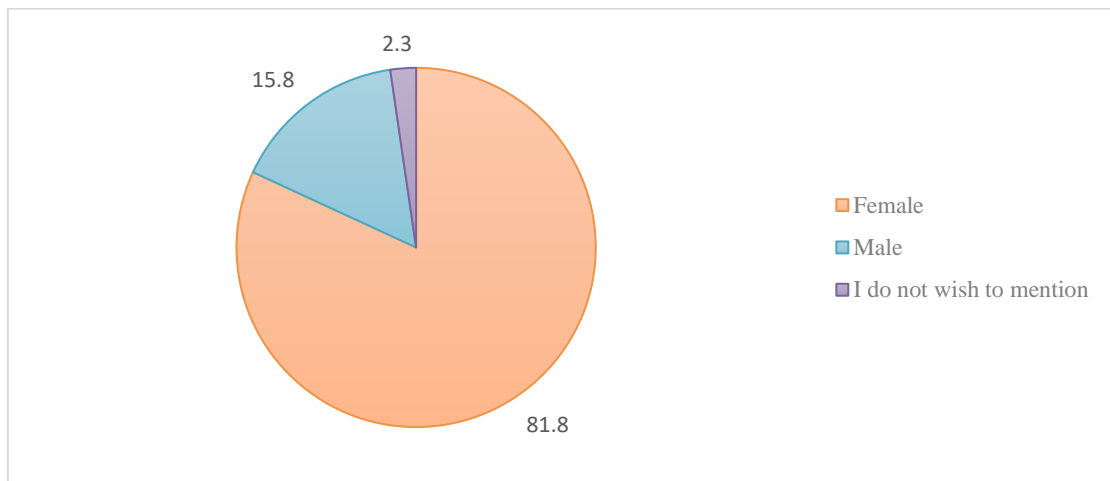

Graph 2: Gender

Graph 3: Age group

Regarding the age group of the participants, 70.5% were between 21-30 years old, 15.9% were between 31-40 years old, 11.4% were between 41-50 years old, and finally, 2.3% were 51 years old and above.


Graph 4: Years of experience

Concerning years of experience, 72.7% had 0-5 years of experience, 18.2% had 15 years and above, 6.8% had 6-10 years of experience, while only 2.3% had 11-15 years of experience.
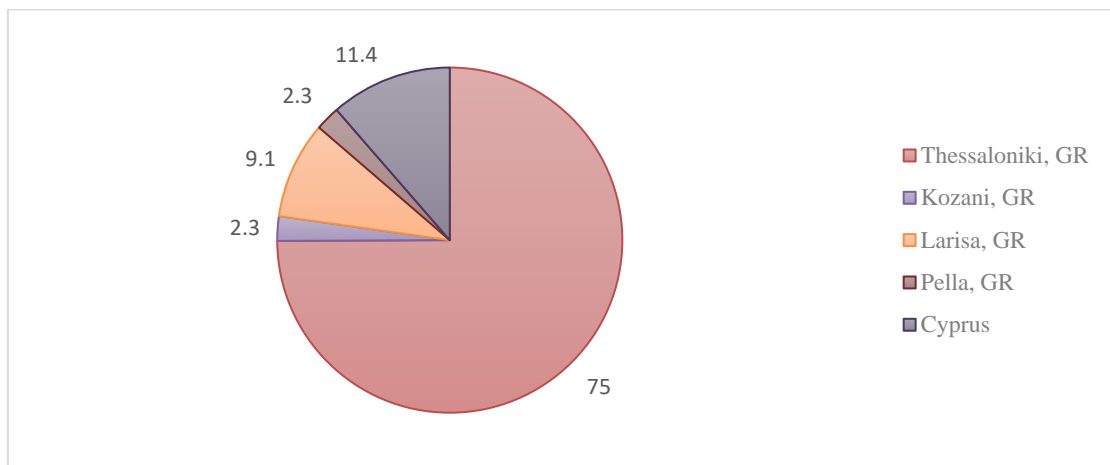
Graph 5: Work/study city

The study involved individuals from various parts of Greece and Cyprus. Initially, 75% were working or studying in Thessaloniki, 2.3% in Kozani, 9.1% in Larissa, and 2.3% in Pella. On the other hand, 11.4% were working or studying in cities in Cyprus (Larnaca, Nicosia).
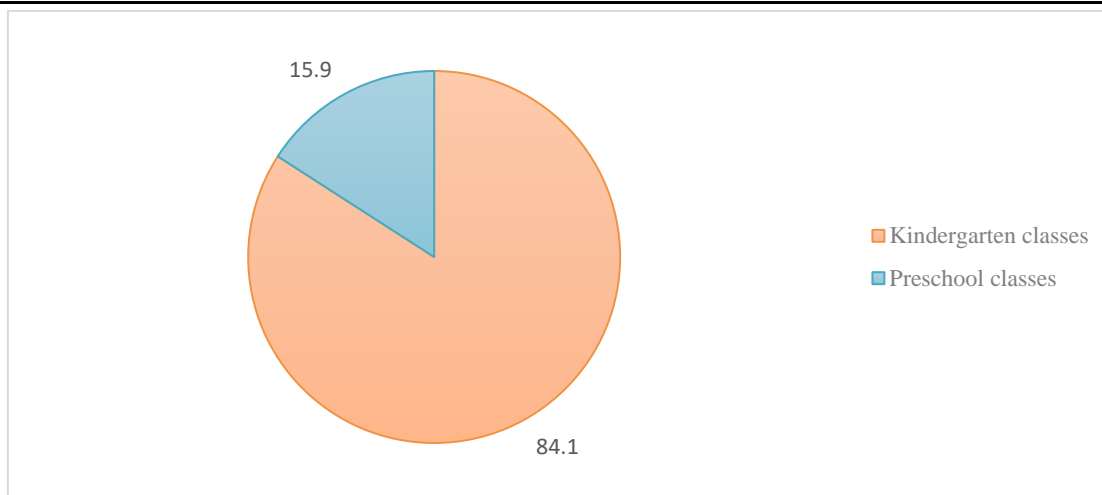
Graph 6: School level of teaching

The last question regarding demographic information pertained to the school level of the children the students had in their practicum and the department the early childhood educators had in the current school year. Specifically, 84.1% were children in kindergarten classes, while 15.9% were children in preschool classes.

3.3 Instrument of Measurement

The primary instrument of measurement for this particular research was a 20-question questionnaire. Candidates were required to respond to a series of both closed and open-ended questions concerning communication strategies in Greek as a second/foreign language. Initially, the introduction outlined the purpose of the research and briefly explained the communication strategies. Furthermore, it was emphasized that the questionnaire was anonymous and that the findings would be used exclusively for research purposes. Before candidates began completing the questionnaire, they provided their consent to participate in the research in the respective field provided.

The first set of questions pertained to demographic information, including gender, age, role (student or educator), city of work/study, years of experience, and the school level of the children (i.e., kindergarten, nursery, or infants). The second set of questions focused on communication strategies. Specifically, candidates were asked if there were refugee or immigrant children in their class. Subsequently, they were asked if they were familiar with communication strategies and which teaching methods, they used in their class to integrate non-native children (e.g., cooperative activities, role-playing, informal discussions, cultural references, songs, music, and videos).

The third set of questions addressed the ways in which a child attempts to draw the attention of both classmates and educators to show something of interest. The fourth set of questions concerned the interactions the child has with both classmates and educators, as well as the methods used by the child to communicate. The fifth set of questions focused on how the child expresses pleasure and sadness regarding events that occur in the classroom. This set also included reactions of the child when not understood by classmates and reactions of classmates when the non-native child's message is not

understood. The sixth and final set of questions addressed communication problems. Specifically, how often candidates face communication problems, how they handle them, and whether they promote the development of communication strategies among children.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants were initially informed about the content, purpose, and conduct of the research. Before commencing the questionnaire, they responsibly declared their willingness to participate in the research process. It was particularly emphasized that participation was anonymous, and the data would be used solely for research purposes. Additionally, it was ensured that no personal data would be published.

4. Results or Findings

Upon processing the data derived from the questionnaires, the researchers utilized descriptive statistics to construct a comprehensive profile of communication literacy in early childhood education. This analytical approach aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the various aspects related to communication skills among both undergraduate students and early childhood educators. Through a systematic examination of demographic information and survey responses, the study sought to illuminate key patterns and trends in communication practices and challenges within this educational context.
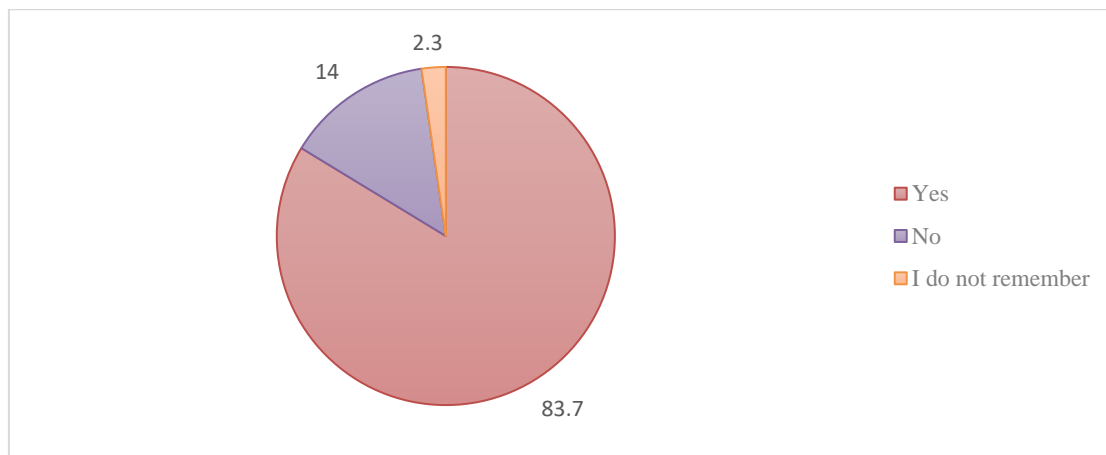

Graph 7: Children with an immigrant/refugee resume

According to the graph (Graph 7), 83.7% of the participants state that in their working environment there were children with an immigrant or refugee background. In contrast, 14% stated that they do not have any, while 2% do not remember to report.
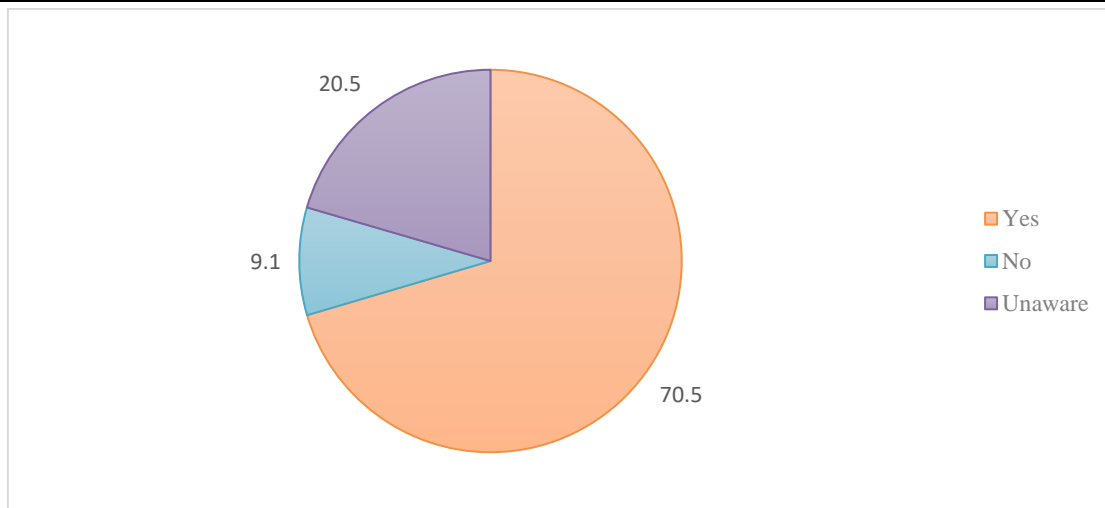
Graph 8: Communicative strategies

In response to the query regarding communicative strategies, it was observed that 70.5% indicated familiarity with communicative strategies. A proportion of 20.5% of the participants responded with uncertainty, while a small yet equally significant percentage stated that they were unaware of communicative strategies (9.1%).
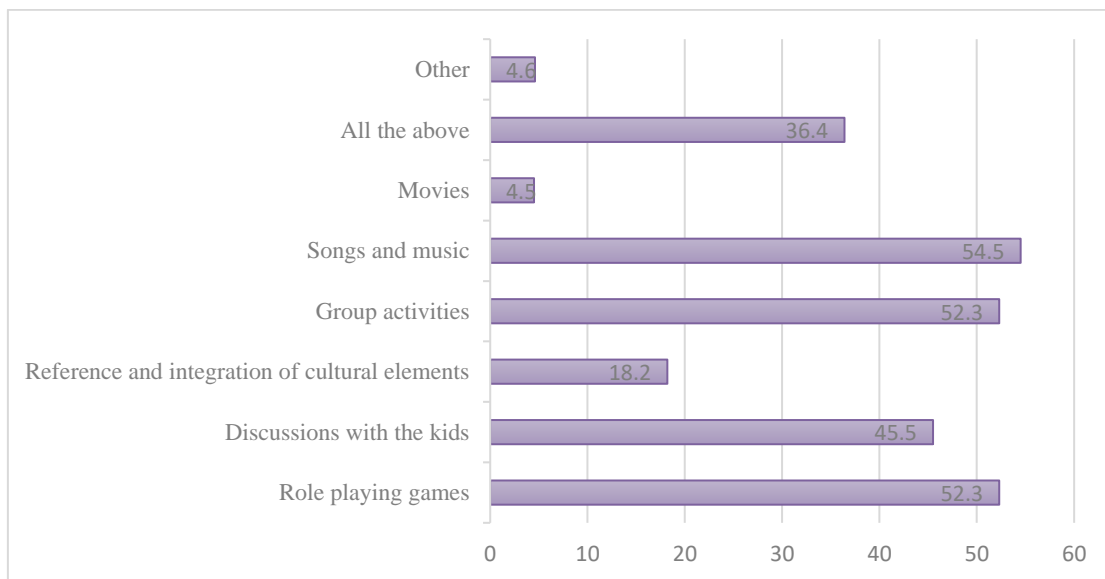

Graph 9: Teaching methods

Participants were also asked to report on the teaching methods they employ in the classroom aiming at the smooth and consequently overall integration of bilingual children. It was found that 54.5%, both students and educators, stated that they use songs and music during the educational process. Role-playing/games and cooperative group activities followed with a percentage of 52.3%. Furthermore, 45.5% of the participants engage in discussions in small groups, while 36.4% reported using all the teaching techniques suggested by the researcher (role-playing/games, small group discussions,

incorporation and integration of cultural elements, cooperative group activities, songs/music, and films).

Only 18.2% of the participants mentioned and incorporated cultural elements of the children into the learning process, and 4.5% used children's films. In conclusion, 4.6% chose the option "Other," where participants were free to propose their ideas. It is noted that in addition to the above, they employ music and movement activities and meetings with the children and their parents, during which activities are implemented collectively. Participants were asked to record the ways in which the child attempted to attract the attention of both the students/trainees - during their practical exercises - and the educators.
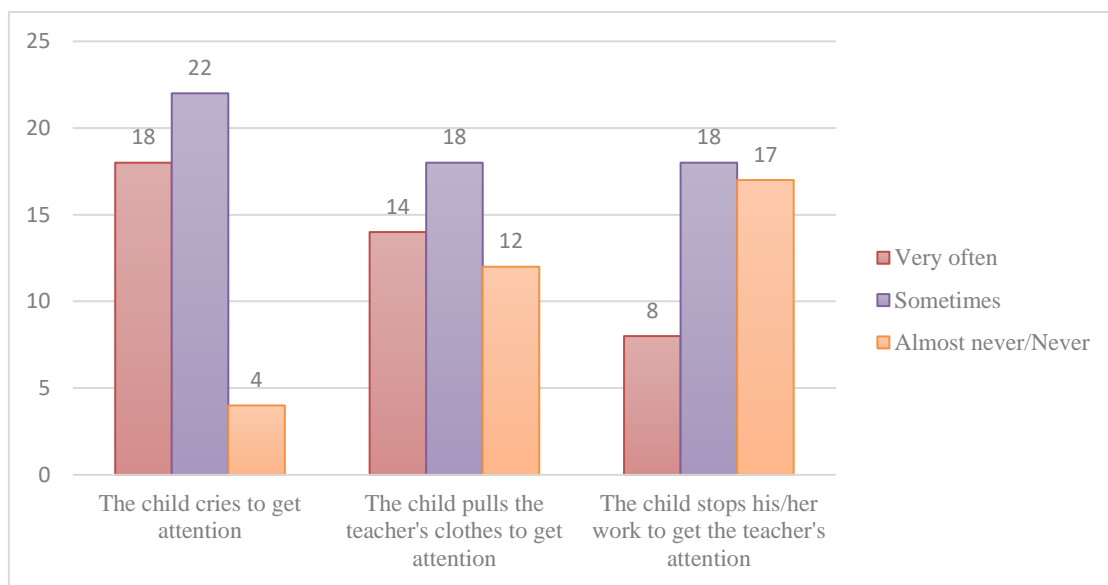

Graph 10: Teacher's attention

Based on the experiences of both students/trainees and educators, the research revealed that the child sometimes cries to attract the attention of their educator (50%). Additionally, there are instances where the child stops their work (42%) or pulls on the educator's clothing to show something that interests them (41%).
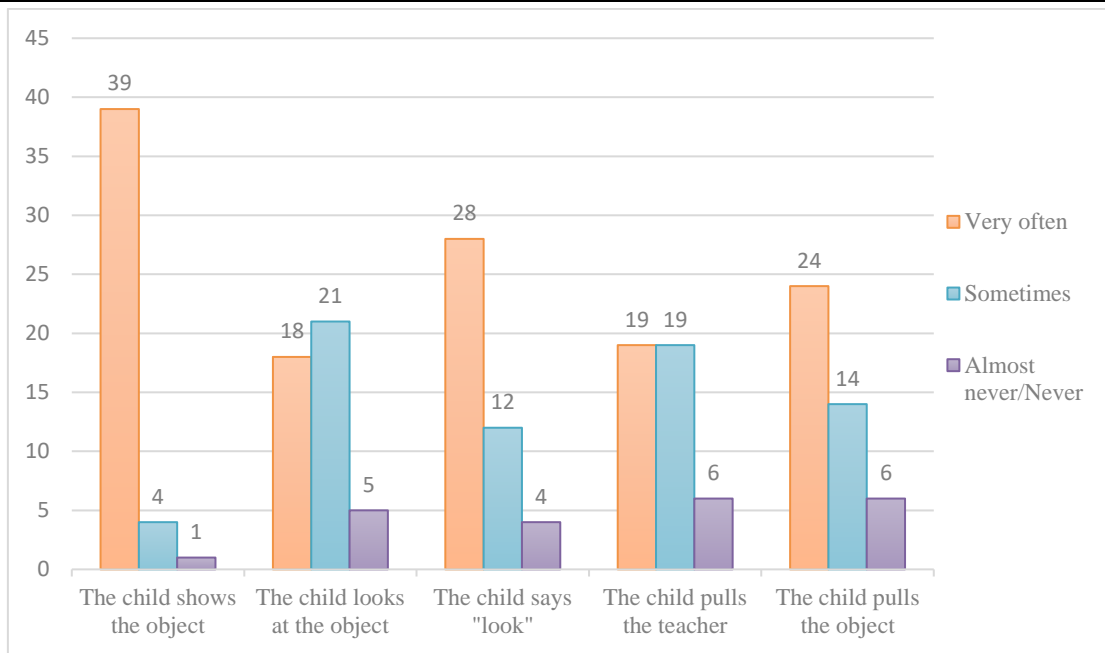
Graph 11: Methods of drawing interest to an object

Regarding the methods used by the child to direct their attention to something of interest, it was observed that the majority of children point to the object (88%). According to the participants, the immediate subsequent actions of the children include shouting "look" (64%) or pulling the object (55%) or looking at the object of interest (48%). Finally, in the option "pulls the educator," there was no clear preference, as there was an equal distribution between "very often" and "sometimes" (43%).
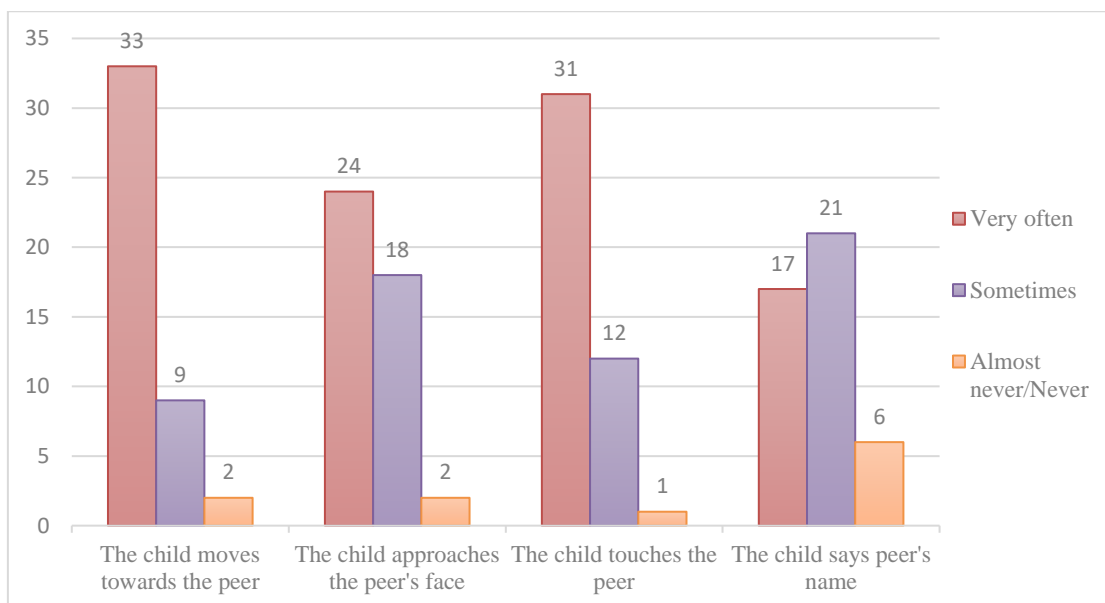

Graph 12: Methods of garnering attention from peers

According to Graph 12, in order to approach a peer, the child primarily moves towards them (75%) or touches them (70%). Rarely does the child approach their peer's face (55%) or say their name (48%).
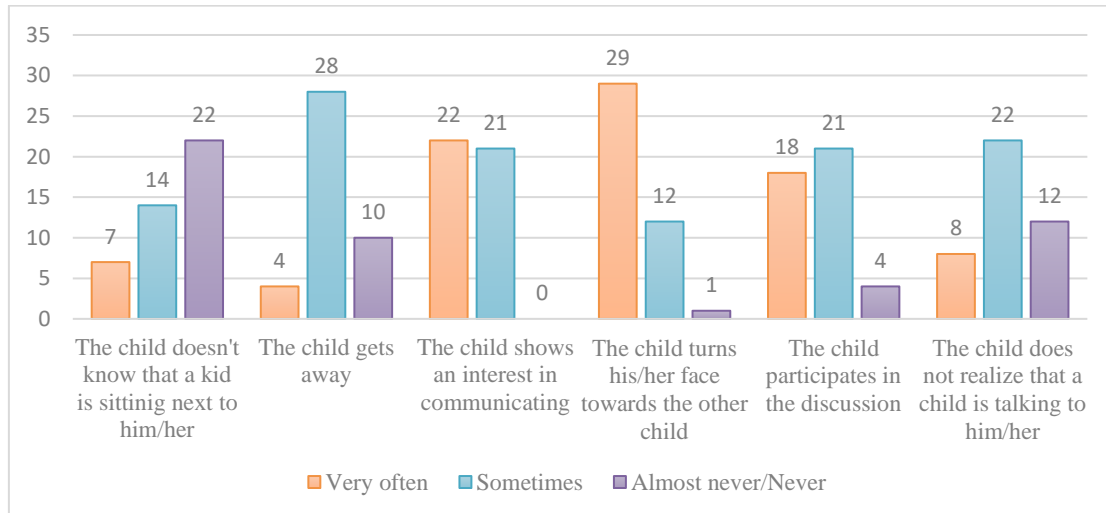

Graph 13: Interactions with peers

According to the participants, when interacting with their peers, children often turn their faces towards the other child (69%). It is almost never or never that a child knows if another child is sitting next to them (51%), and sometimes to very often, the child shows interest in communicating (51%). However, there are times when the child withdraws (67%) and does not particularly wish to participate in discussions (49%). Finally, sometimes the participants observed that the child did not realize that a peer was talking to them (52%).
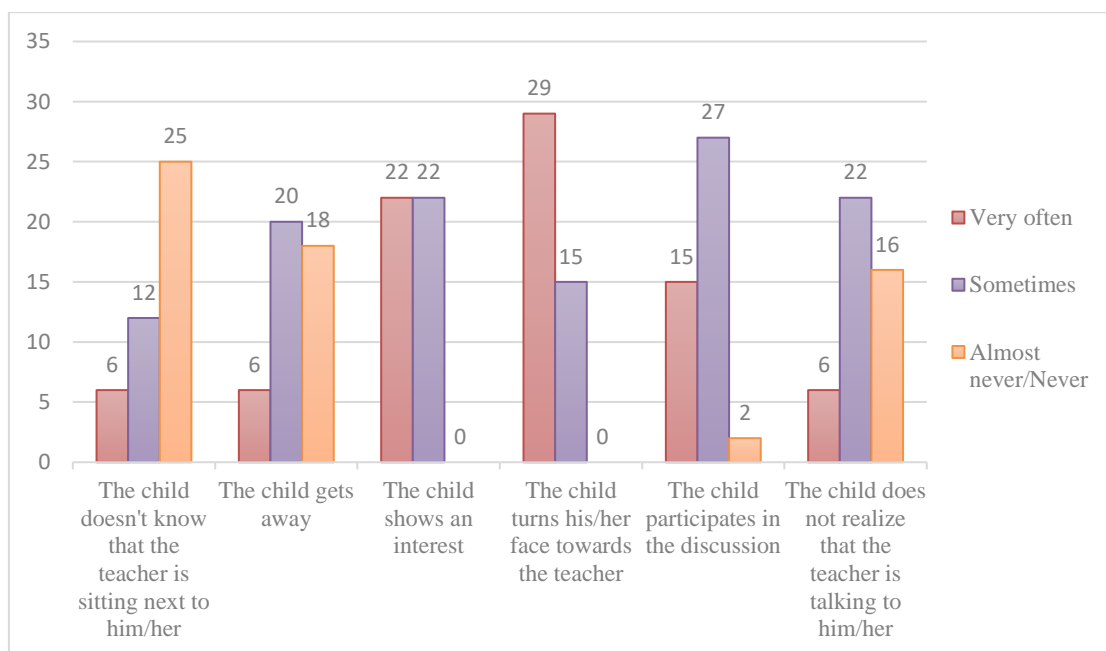

Graph 14: Interactions with educator

Regarding interactions between the child and the educator, it is noted that the child often turns their face towards the educator (66%). Additionally, sometimes the child participates in discussions (61%), and less frequently withdraws (45%). Participants stated that the child almost never to never knows if the educator is sitting next to them (58%), however, there are times when they do not realize that the educator is addressing them (50%). Finally, in the option "the child shows interest," there was no clear preference, as there was an equal distribution between "very often" and "sometimes" (50%).
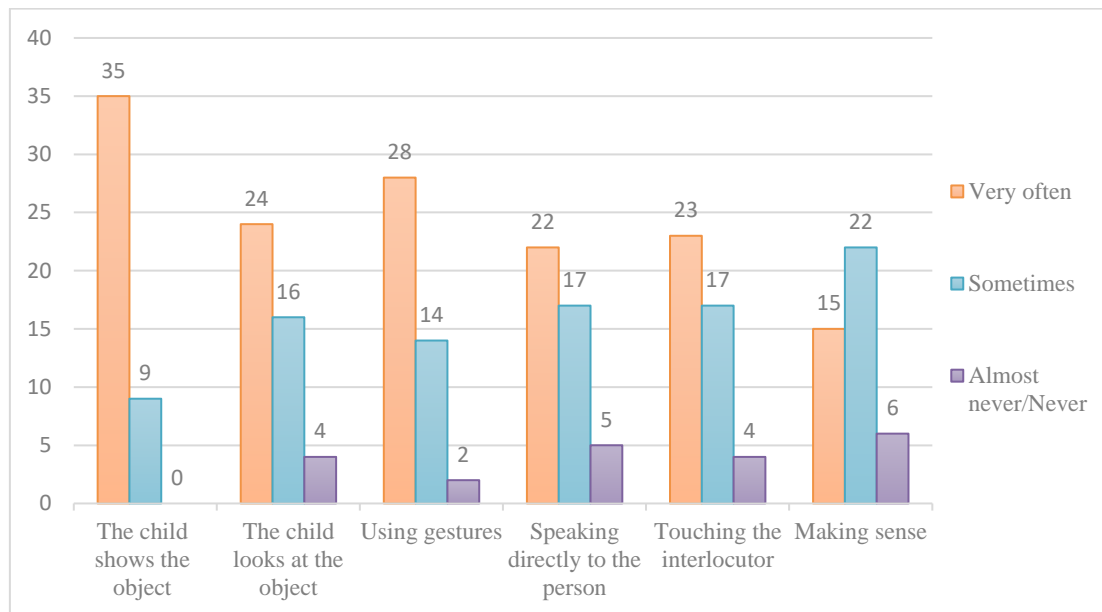

Graph 15: Initiation of interactions

The ways in which a child initiates an interaction vary. Most often, they show the object (80%) and use various gestures (64%). Less frequently, they touch their interlocutor (52%) and address them (50%) or make eye contact (55%). Finally, there are times when they make various gestures to their interlocutors (51%).
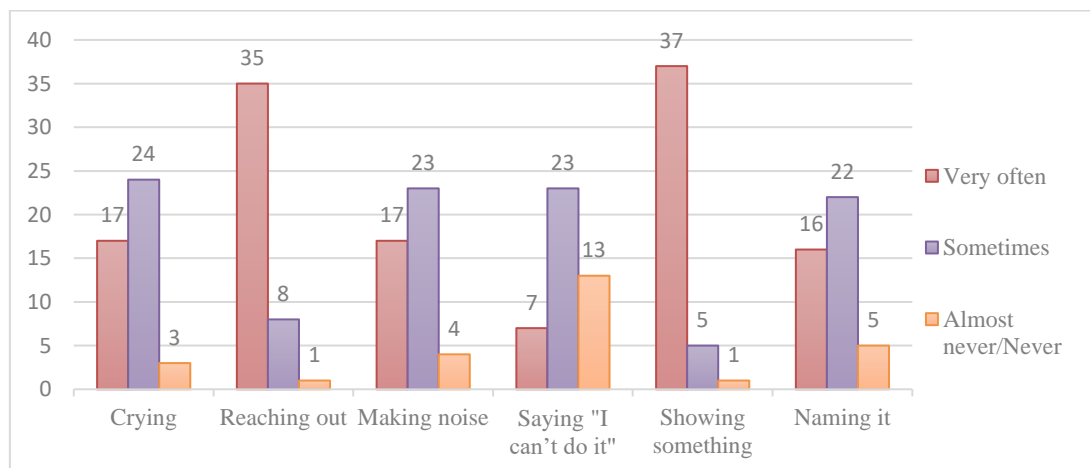

Graph 16: Ways of expressing desires

As observed, the child uses six different ways to ask for something from either the educator or their peers. According to the participants' experiences, mainly the child extends their hand (80%) or shows the object (85%). Sometimes they cry (55%) or make noise to draw attention (52%). Additionally, there are few occasions when they use the phrase "I can't" so that educators or peers can provide the assistance they seek (53%) or by naming it (51%).
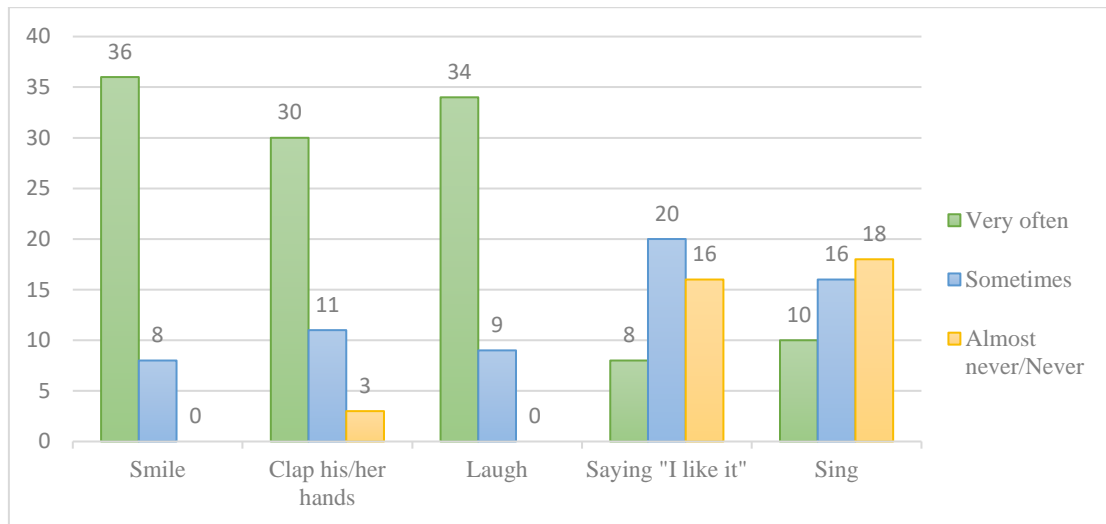

Graph 17: Externalization of pleasure

According to the participants, the child expresses their pleasure mainly with a smile (82%). This is followed by laughter (79%) and clapping (68%). Sometimes they express it by saying they like it (45%), while almost never or never do they express pleasure through singing (41%).
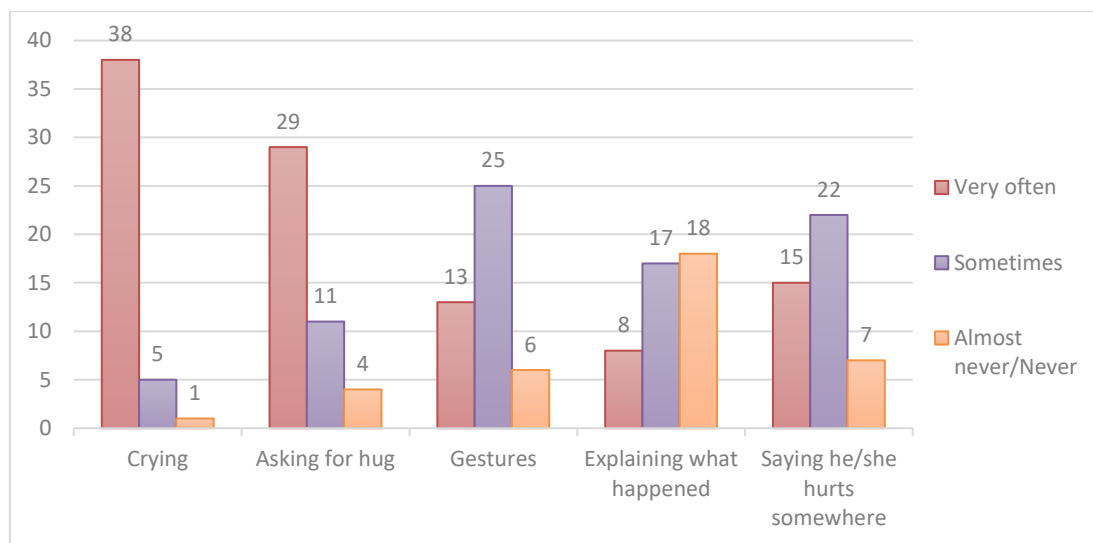

Graph 18: Externalization of sadness

The child expresses their displeasure through crying (86%). Their immediate reaction is often to seek comfort through hugs (66%). Sometimes they use gestures (57%) or mention that they are hurt (50%). However, they almost never explain what happened to the educator (42%).
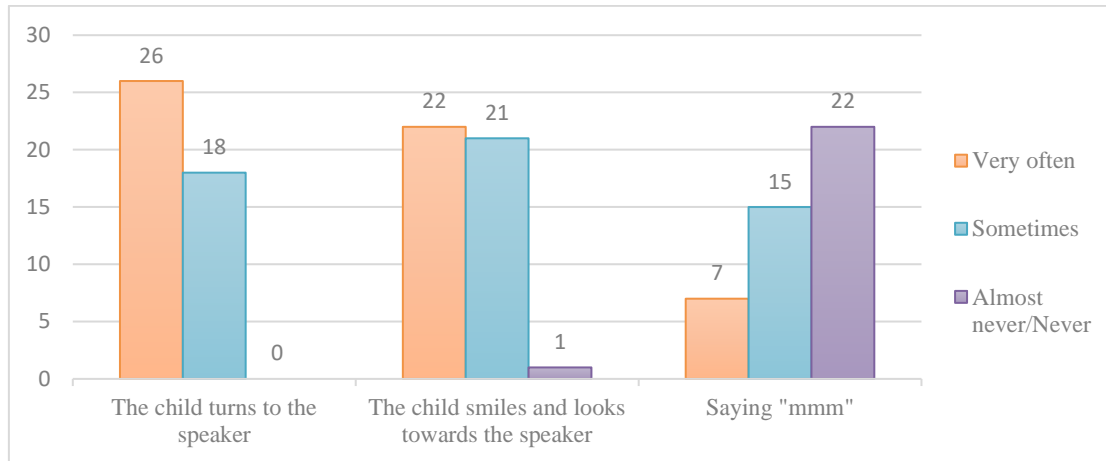

Graph 19: Attention and listening

According to the participants, the child indicates that they are paying attention or listening by turning towards the speaker (59%). They often smile when spoken to (50%), while almost never or never do they respond by saying "mmm" (50%).
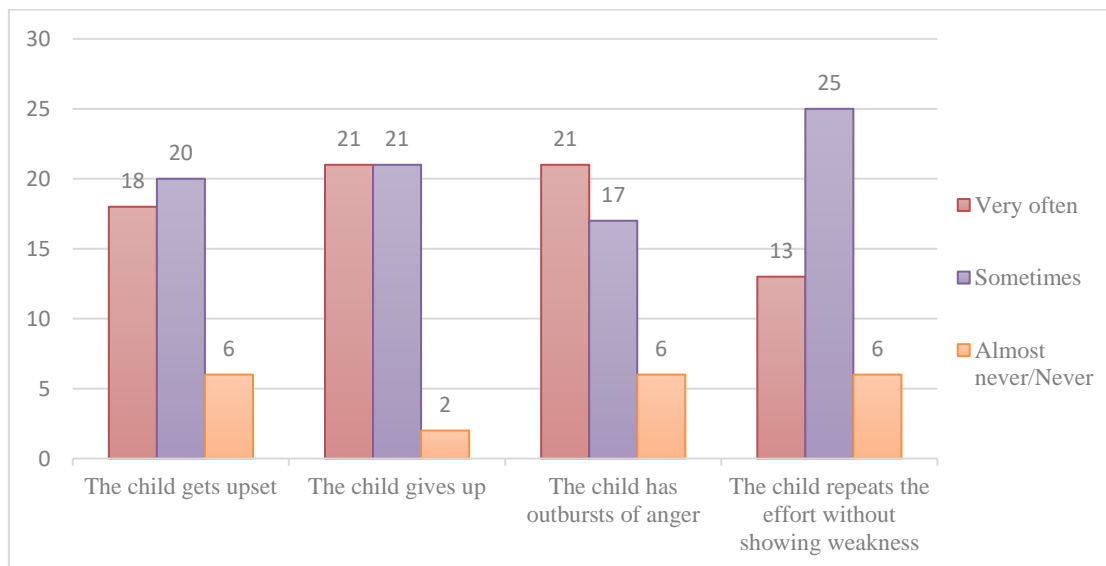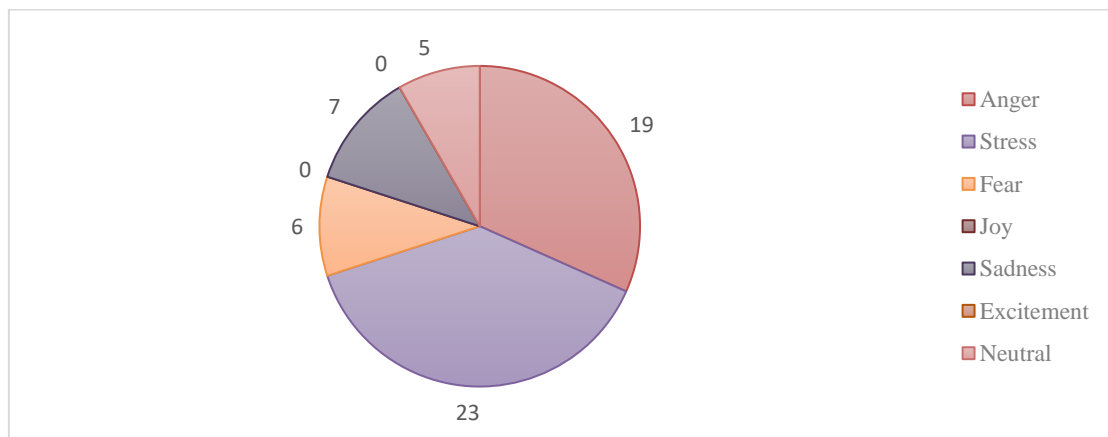

Graph 20: Difficulty understanding

Usually, when the child struggles to understand, they tend to have outbursts of anger (48%). On the other hand, sometimes they become agitated (45%) or repeat the effort without showing signs of difficulty (57%). It is worth noting that in the option "gives up," there was no clear preference, as there was an equal split between "very often" and "sometimes" (48%).
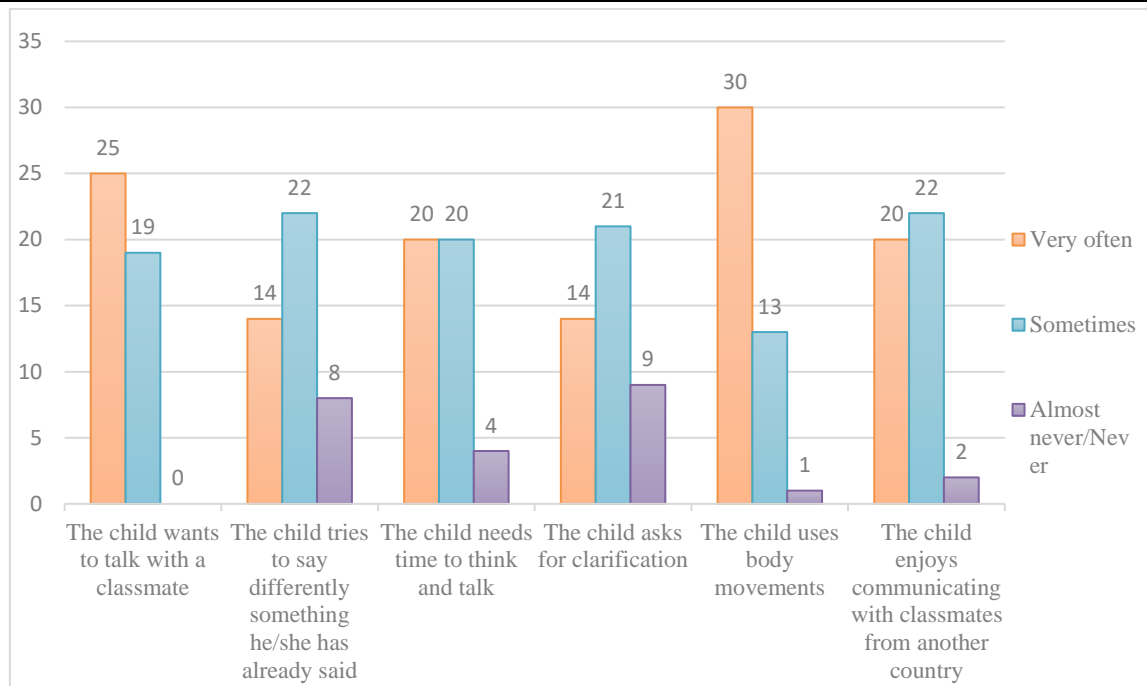
Graph 21: Interactions and reactions

It is observed that the child often uses body movements (68%) and desires to interact with classmates (57%). Specifically, sometimes, they enjoy interacting with children from different cultural backgrounds—that is, speaking a different language (50%). They try to express themselves differently from what they have already assumed (50%) or ask for further clarification (48%). Finally, in the option "the child needs time to think and speak," there was no clear preference, as there was an equal split between "very often" and "sometimes" (45%).
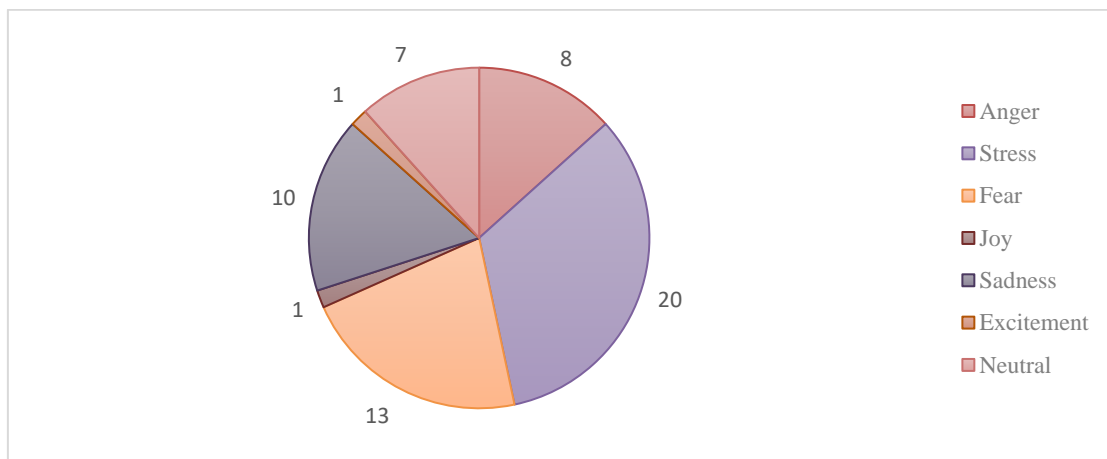

Graph 22: Difficulty understanding classmates

The child's emotions when struggling to understand their classmates are unpleasant and stressful. Specifically, they experience anxiety (38%) and anger (32%). Seldom do they show sadness (12%) or fear (10%), while a portion (8%) remains neutral. Lastly, it's worth noting that joy (0%) and excitement (0%) are absent.
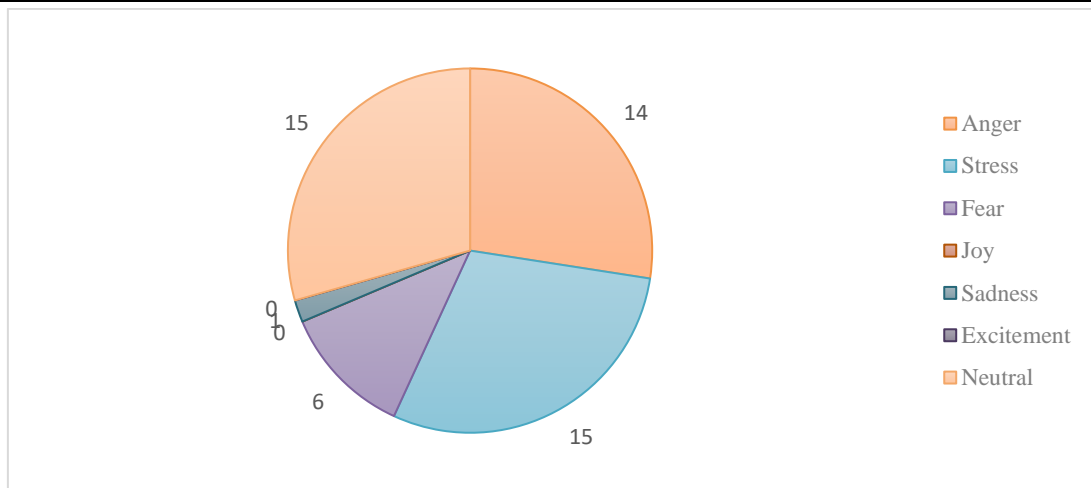
Graph 23: Difficulty understanding a child speaking another language

Children's emotions when they struggle to understand a classmate who speaks another language are equally unpleasant and stressful. Specifically, children mostly feel sadness (29%) and anger (27%). However, a significant portion indicates a neutral stance (29%). They seldom feel fear (12%), while joy (0%) and excitement (0%) are absent.


Graph 24: Difficulty understanding peers

According to the participants, the majority of children feel anxiety when they struggle to understand their peers (33%). Fear (22%) and sadness (17%) follow, with anger (13%) and a neutral stance (12%) being less prevalent. However, there is also a percentage (2%) indicating feelings of joy and excitement.
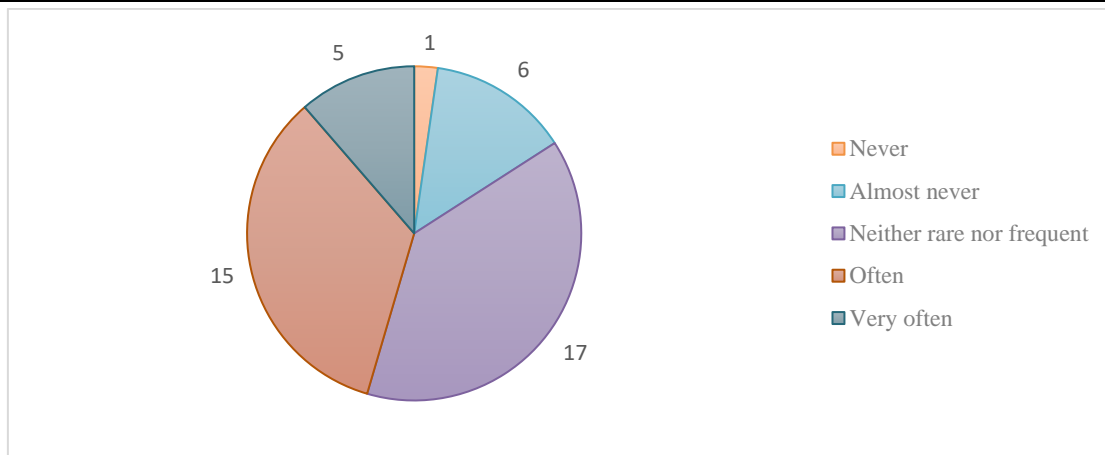
Graph 25: Communication problems in the classroom

The majority of participants reported facing communication problems with non-native speaking children in their class on a daily basis. 39% stated that these problems are neither rare nor frequent. 34% claimed to frequently encounter and resolve such communication issues, while 11% do so very frequently. Conversely, 14% almost never experience communication problems, while 2% never do.
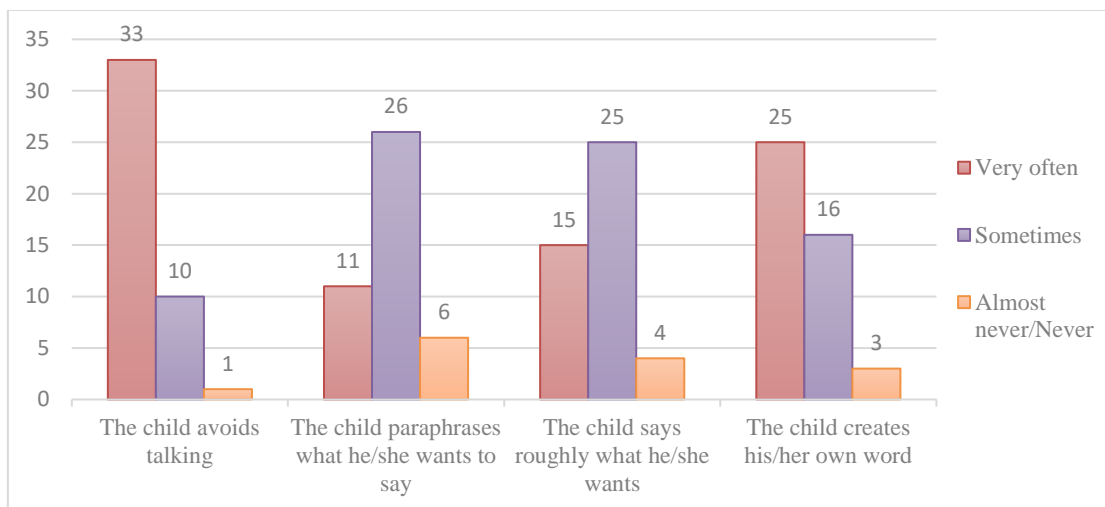
Graph 26A: Expression difficulties

Most participants indicated that when children struggle to express themselves, they tend to avoid speaking altogether (75%) or invent their own words (57%). However, at times, they attempt to paraphrase what they want to say (60%) or approximate it (57%).
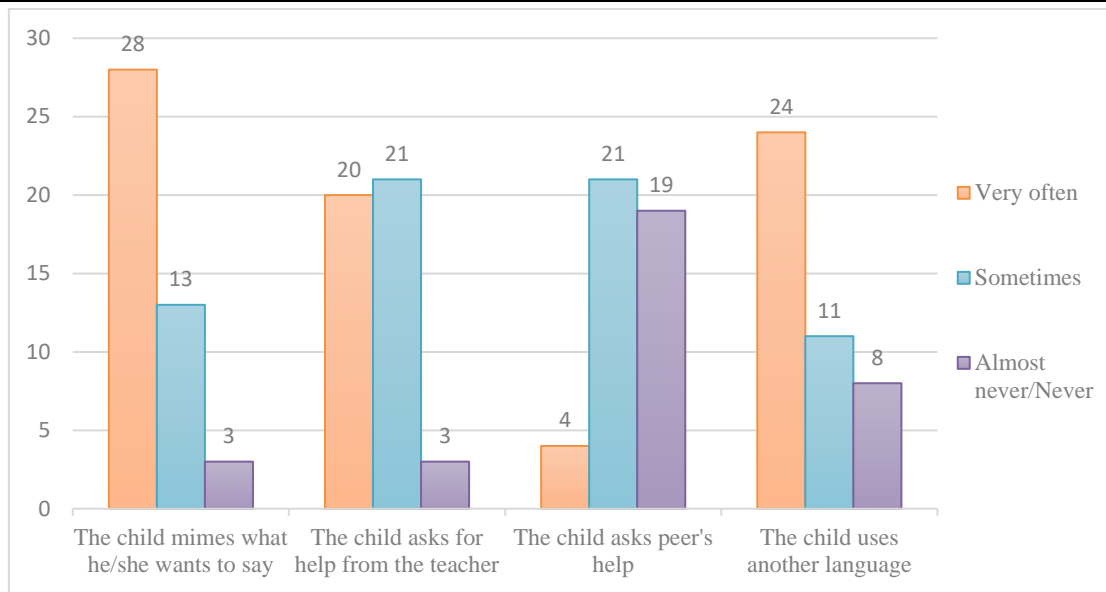
Graph 26B: Expression difficulties
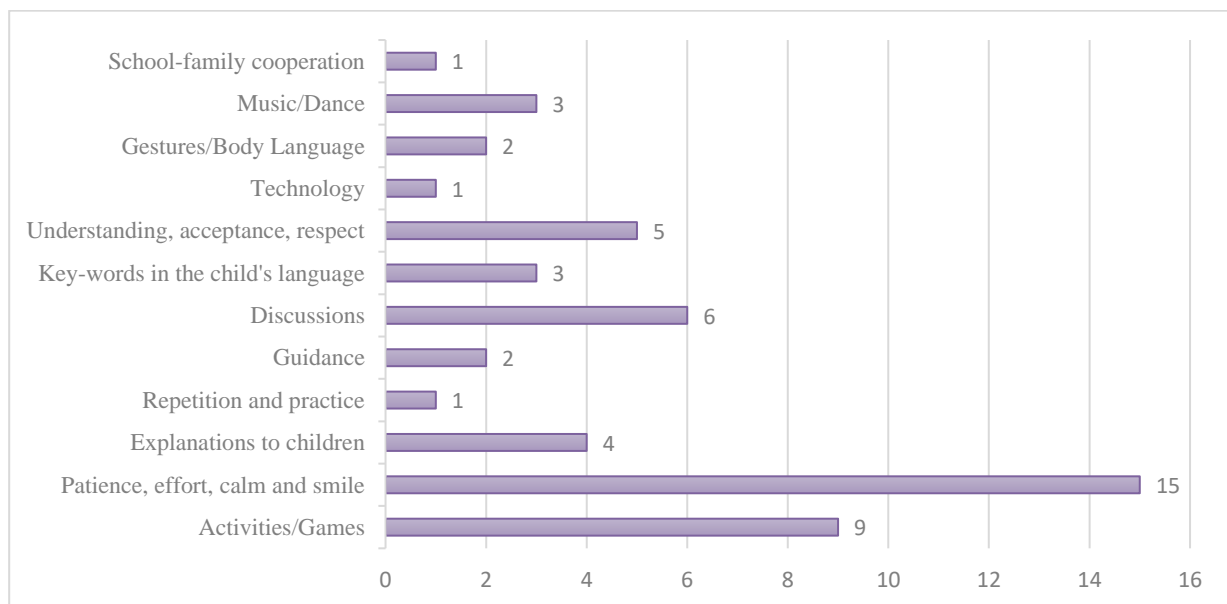
Furthermore, participants noted that children often resort to mimicking what they cannot articulate verbally (64%) or using another language (56%). Occasionally, they seek assistance from educators (48%) or classmates (48%).

Graph 27: Proposed solutions for communication problems

Participants were asked to propose solutions and express their opinions on resolving communication problems in the classroom. Various suggestions were provided. Primarily, the majority attempts to address communication problems through activities and games (22%), with additional explanations to the children (10%), discussions (15%), and guidance (5%). Moreover, they emphasized that patience, effort, calmness, and smiles (37%), as well as understanding, acceptance, and respect (12%), are crucial pillars for resolving problems and providing appropriate support to the children.
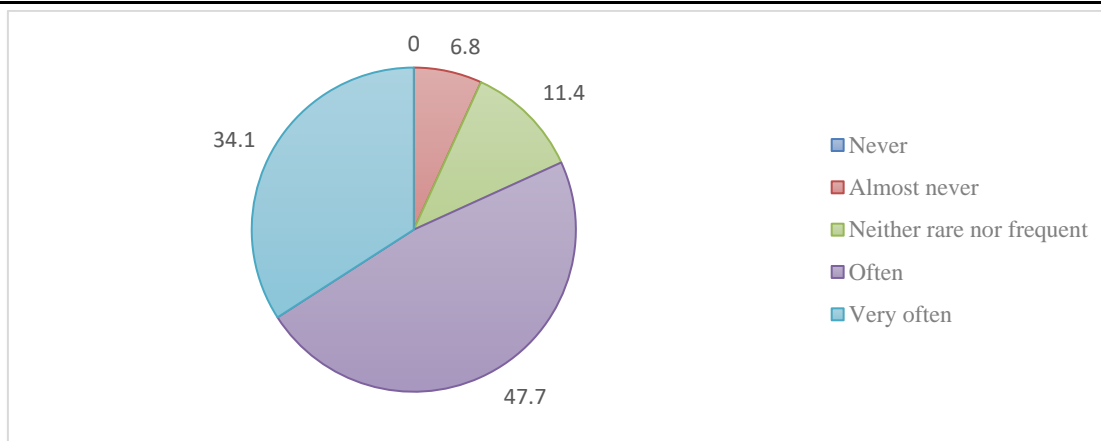
Graph 28: Promotion of communication strategies among children

Concluding the questionnaire, participants were asked to evaluate how often they promote the development of communication strategies among children. The majority stated that they often (48%) to very often (34%) promote these communication strategies.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Educators and prospective educators demonstrate a variety of approaches and tools to engage children in the classroom. They utilize music, role-playing games, discussions, and other teaching methods to enhance communication and collaboration among children. This is consistent with research conducted by Kárpáti (2017) and Papadopoulos (2020). In addition to the aforementioned approaches (music, role-playing games, discussions), Kárpáti (2017) advocates for the improvement of language teaching through games that enhance children's sensory skills and games involving monologues to promote communication development. Furthermore, it emphasizes that the best way to learn languages is through interaction. On the other hand, Papadopoulos (2020; 2021b; 2022) discusses intercultural communication. Specifically, activities involving the comparison and contrast of cultures and active involvement of children in these activities, as well as free expression of opinions and resilience to ambiguity, are techniques that help young learners acquire communication skills.

Children employ various strategies to attract the attention of educators and classmates, including crying, showing objects, or seeking visual contact. However, the research by Goldberg, Schwerter, Seidel, Müller, and Stürmer (2021) observed that the majority of educators with minimal work experience focus their attention on students who actively participate in activities.

The educators observe that children often turn their faces towards their classmates and engage in communication activities. The findings appear to align with other research, such as that of Nikoloudi (2014), which found that the implementation of activities enriched with various cultural elements resulted in the development of interactions among children, regardless of nationality. Additionally, the study by Antopolskaya, Zhuravleva, and Baybakova (2017) supplements the idea that through interactions with

peers, children gain experiences and change their interpersonal relationships. However, sometimes, there may be cases where children are not interested in participating in social activities. This is consistent with the research of Tsiara, Sakellariou, Kalogiannaki, and Konsola (2022). Specifically, their research highlights that the school unit infrastructure, supervisory materials, staff, pedagogical climate, and the daily program of the kindergarten are key factors influencing the active participation of students.

Educators play a significant role in creating an environment that promotes communication, collaboration, and interaction among children. This is consistent with the research of Bukhalenkova, Veraksa, and Chursina (2022) and Zachou, Georgouli, and Stergiou (2023). The above research confirms that educators are called upon to create an environment in which they initially provide appropriate emotional support to their students, warmth, and trust. Furthermore, they should encourage the comprehensive development of their students, while the organization of the space is also a significant parameter in skill development. Creating an environment where all languages and cultures are accepted and equal lays the foundation for communication and collaboration and provides stimuli for interactions. Therefore, their response to children's attempts to approach and communicate is crucial for creating positive dynamics in the classroom.

Children use various methods to express their emotions, including smiling, laughing, crying, hugging, and gestures. Similar conclusions were drawn from both the research of Motsiou and Valetopoulos (2021) and Papadopoulos (2020). The former agree that children express their emotions through various methods and find it easier to express feelings of joy, sorrow, anger, and fear. The latter, in addition to the above, states that children feel joy and excitement when using cultural elements, such as their mother tongue, in classroom activities. While sorrow, fear, and anxiety dominate when their classmates struggle to understand them. Therefore, educators and classmates must be sensitive and respond accordingly to the needs and emotions of the children.

Some children face difficulties in expressing their emotions, using imitation, reference to another language, or avoiding communication. The findings seem to agree with other research, such as that of Papadopoulos (2020). Specifically, it observed that in cases of inability to express themselves, children felt embarrassment and anxiety when their classmates could not understand them. In addition to the above, understanding peers or non-native-speaking classmates may pose a challenge for children. This seems to agree with the research of Mouti, Maligoudi, Gogonas, and Gkaitatzis (2023). Specifically, the children in the class did not neglect their non-native speaking classmates. On the contrary, they included them in their games. However, the main obstacle was the communication problems that arose. Non-native speaking children struggled to understand classmates speaking the majority language, leading them to withdraw from the game voluntarily.

Educators need to promote the development of communication skills among children through activities, discussions, and guidance. Patience, understanding, and respect are basic principles that should govern interaction with children. In addition to the above, Papadopoulos' research (2020) adds that providing cultural stimuli,

collaboration among children, appropriate educational material, such as fairy tales and games, as well as the use of various languages in the classroom, helps develop communication skills. Moreover, the study by Kirk and Jay (2018) adds that the implementation of activities guided by the children themselves enhances their socio-emotional development.

Finally, communication problems in the classroom are common but can be addressed with patience, explanations, and guidance. Activities and games can help strengthen children's communication skills. Similar conclusions were drawn from the research of Griva and Papadopoulou (2018), which emphasizes the familiarity of both students and educators with communication strategies which offer linguistic and cognitive development while providing incentives. Additionally, in Papadopoulos' research (2020), educators made it clear that they face communication problems with their non-native speaking students and emphasize the need for modern methodological approaches.

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