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The Use of Formulaic Chunks by EFL Very Young Learners: Interactive Games vs. Interactive Stories

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the extent to which interactive storytelling and story-based drama activities would influence very young learners' use of formulaic language chunks in English by following a mixed-methods approach with a quasi-experimental design. In a public preschool 4-year-old context, the control group was taught English via interactive game-based activities, besides contextual listening and speaking activities, whereas the experimental group was taught through interactive storytelling and story-based drama activities. Different data collection instruments were used to ensure credibility and confirmability of the findings, including video recording of the classes, speaking rubric, and the researcher's field notes. The quantitative data were analysed using the Mann-Whitney U test, and the findings revealed that there were no significant differences between the post- and delayed assessment scores of the students regarding the use of formulaic language chunks in English based on the yes/no questions, but there were significant differences regarding wh-questions. Given the experimental group's superior performance in answering the wh-questions, it appears that interactive storytelling and story-based drama are effective techniques for improving learners' speaking skills in English. The qualitative findings highlighted learners' engagement and positive attitudes towards interactive storytelling and story-based drama, reinforcing the effectiveness of these techniques in enhancing speaking skills.

Keywords: Formulaic chunks in English, EFL very young learners, game-based activities, storytelling, drama activities.

İngilizceyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenen Erken Yaş Öğrencilerinin Kalıpsal Parçaları Kullanmaları: İnteraktif Oyunlara Karşı İnteraktif Hikâyeler

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, etkileşimli hikâye anlatımı ve hikâye temelli drama etkinliklerinin erken yaşta İngilizce öğrenenlerin İngilizce kalıpsal dil parçacıklarını kullanmaları üzerinde ne kadar etkili olduğunu yarı deneysel bir tasarım içeren karma yöntemler yaklaşımını izleyerek araştırmıştır. Bir devlet anaokulunun 4 yaş grubunda, kontrol grubuna etkileşimli oyun temelli etkinlikler ve bağlam içinde dinleme ve konuşma etkinlikleri ile İngilizce öğretilirken deney grubuna etkileşimli hikâye anlatımı ve hikâye temelli drama etkinlikleriyle öğretilmiştir. Bulguların güvenilirliğini ve doğrulanabilirliğini sağlamak için çeşitli veri toplama araçları kullanılmıştır. Bunlar arasında derslerin video kaydı, konuşma rubriği ve araştırmacının saha notları bulunmaktadır. Nicel veriler, Mann-Whitney U testi kullanılarak analiz edildi ve bulgular, öğrencilerin evet/hayır sorularına dayalı kalıpsal dil parçalarını kullanmalarıyla ilgili son ve gecikmeli değerlendirme puanları arasında anlamlı bir fark olmadığını, ancak açık uçlu (wh-questions) sorulara dayalı İngilizce kalıpsal dil parçalarını kullanmalarıyla ilgili anlamlı bir fark olduğunu ortaya koydu. Deney grubunun açık uçlu sorulara cevap vermedeki üstün performansı göz önüne alındığında, etkileşimli hikâye anlatımı ve hikâye temelli drama etkinliklerinin öğrencilerin İngilizce konuşma becerilerini geliştirmede etkili teknikler olduğu görülmektedir. Nitel bulgular, öğrencilerin etkileşimli hikâye anlatımı ve hikâye tabanlı drama etkinliklerine yönelik ilgilerini ve olumlu tutumlarını vurgulayarak bu tekniklerin konuşma becerilerini geliştirmedeki etkililiğini pekiştirmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngilizce kalıplaşmış ifadeler, erken yaşta İngilizce öğrenenler, oyun temelli etkinlikler, hikâye anlatımı, drama etkinlikleri

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Introduction

It is vital for language teachers to be aware of the unique attributes of each age group to employ appropriate and effective teaching techniques to help learners acquire foreign language skills effectively. Accordingly, “very young learners" (hereafter VYLs) are preschool children between the ages of 3 and 7 who are acquiring English as a foreign or second language (Puchta & Elliott, 2017). The language development of VYLs depends on the competence of their teachers and the quality of the entire educational framework (Murphy, 2014). Some suggested ways to teach and practice new language items are total physical response activities, storytelling, and songs, as well as setting conversations in English while playing games, painting, and craft activities (MEB, 2018; Nafissi & Shafiee, 2020). Beyond teaching everyday functional language, teachers should design activities that encourage students to repeat language patterns in a natural and meaningful way, like songs, rhymes, and chants. Since VYLs are naturally curious and love to talk as well as excel at picking up chunks rather than parts of a language, teachers can provide examples and rephrase target patterns to help them practice (Linse, 2006; Moon, 2000; Uysal & Yavuz, 2015). Despite recognizing formulaic chunks in a foreign language (FL) well, their use of chunks accurately takes much longer, depending on how they naturally develop their grammar skills and attempt to produce fixed phrases (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2017). Although English is a primary foreign language in many countries, starting from early education does not guarantee that everyone in those countries speaks English successfully (Tuzcu Eken, 2021). Accurate and fluent speech production can be hampered by learners’ mistakes and obstacles they experience throughout their language acquisition process (Sun, 2020). In this respect, teaching learners to use pre-constructed phrases can significantly improve their fluency in speaking English, which helps them boost their confidence and reduce their speaking anxiety (Mohammadi & Enavati, 2018). Learners with a low affective filter (Krashen, 1982) would become more open to comprehensible input and successful in FL speech production (Sun, 2020). Thus, creating a supportive classroom environment and using effective techniques helps learners practice formulaic language chunks appropriately and overcome their mental barriers.

Since VYLs are energetic and kinaesthetic and have an innate desire for fast-paced, fun, adventurous, and exploratory activities, an edutainment model that can be exemplified by game-like activities would be more beneficial for VYLs rather than conventional education, where objectives are explicitly stated. Otherwise, they may find it difficult to grasp the concepts and feel confused or scared by the new information. Children between 2 and 7 years are in the pre-operational stage of development and have not yet developed the ability to think about how language works; thus, they cannot handle abstract language (Piaget, 1963). Instead, they can use symbols like words and images to represent things. To clarify, VYLs cannot deal with explicit grammar teaching due to their lack of metacognitive awareness, but they can handle the conveyed meaning through meaningful context with visualization. In short, by seamlessly integrating storytelling and drama into the classroom, teachers of VYLS can provide a holistic learning experience that not only supports language acquisition but also nurtures creativity, empathy, and confidence, which are cornerstones of early childhood development.

Storytelling and drama

Combining pictures, some hands-on materials, and words, stories are invaluable multimodal tools for VYLs to deduce meaning from the meaningful context created for story plot and to enhance all essential language skills, particularly speaking, due to the repetitive chunks within storybooks (Cameron, 2001; Read, 2007; Slatterly & Willis, 2001; Çubukçu, 2015; Porras González, 2010). Teachers prefer storytelling, craft, and play activities to increase communication in their classrooms (Nafissi & Shafiee, 2020). The story script with simple rhymes, clear vocabulary, and lots of repetition (Mair, 2018), accompanied by props like puppets, pictures, gestures, body language, and handmade materials, can make storytelling more engaging, understandable, and memorable for learners (Çubukçu, 2015; Gürsoy, 2023). Reading aloud stories engages the children in a variety of ways: the images help them produce language visually; when acting out the animals or doing actions with the teachers, they are involved physically; it fosters their motivation to produce the language to be involved in the process of retelling; and they interact spontaneously by using the expected utterances when repeating the chunks and the rhythm (Mair, 2018). Moreover, Reynolds et al. (2021) reported ways of integrating storytelling effectively into VYLs’ classrooms, such as designing the reading corner, sticking some words supported with pictures about the story around the classroom, and letting them role-play.

Another suggested multisensory technique to foster VYLs’ language production is drama. Similar to storytelling, drama activities enhance listening comprehension and meaningful language production by using physical movements, demonstrations, and repetition (Dündar, 2015; Rew & Moon, 2013; Yıldız & Cebeci, 2023). Since stories form the foundation for drama activities (Barton & Baguley, 2014), different drama activities can be designed by language teachers as a post-activity, such as miming and passive improvisation, which involve imagination, dramatization, and kinaesthetic activity to check learners’ listening comprehension (Gürsoy, 2023), drama games, puppetry, and role-play, which help learners produce language by taking different roles in a less stressful communicative environment as well as being fun for them (Yıldız & Cebeci, 2023). Thus, as reported in the literature (Saraç, 2007;

Saygılı, 2014) and shown by research (Ellis & Brewster, 2014), storytelling and drama provide a meaningful framework for language acquisition, enhancing memory retention and engagement besides increasing learners' willingness to communicate and speaking skills.

Purpose and Importance of the Study

In Türkiye, English has been the primary compulsory FL for decades. Since 2013, English language instruction officially starts in the 2nd grade of primary education (MEB, 2013). In terms of teaching English to VYLs (TEVYLs), the amount of language exposure varies between private and public schools. Since TEVYLs is not fully integrated into public schools, the only opportunity for VYLs in these schools to learn English is through an extra club activity. Inversely, in the private schools, the starting age drops to 3 years old.

Furthermore, a study by Mart et al. (2016) with 131 preschool teachers in Turkey revealed that, despite differences in age, school type, years of experience, and education, they all held positive attitudes towards teaching English in preschool. When the amount of time is taken into account, there is a significant difference in opportunities between public (2 hours per week) and private school EFL learners (nearly 10 hours per week). The situation is even more challenging for young children in public preschools, as FL instruction is not a part of the curriculum. This inequality is even more pronounced for young children in public preschools, as FL instruction is not a part of their regular curriculum.

Following the constructivist philosophy, an action-oriented approach that focused on making English learning more engaging by using it for real-life communication was suggested, mainly through listening and speaking activities (MEB, 2018). Some constructivist techniques include storytelling, role-playing, and the use of visual aids that allow students to actively participate in the learning process (Moons & De Backer, 2013). Furthermore, Uysal and Yavuz (2015) suggested further investigating how age affects the development of specific language skills and exploring age-appropriate teaching methods for teaching English to VYLs (TEVYLs). Hence, the researcher, as the constructivist teacher trainer seeking innovative ideas by considering learners' characteristics, needs, and interests, aimed at closely examining the progress of public-school VYLs in English. In addition, recently conducted research in TEVYLs focused on the lexical chunks through the Peppa Pig cartoon series (Kokla, 2021), vocabulary (Tarakçıoğlu & Tunçarslan, 2014), and literacy development through dramatic storytelling (Alkilani & Zhang, 2024); however, no study was found regarding the use of form-based chunks in this field. Accordingly, among several aforementioned techniques for TEVYLs, such as song, game, story, and drama, this study aims to identify what works more specifically in interactive storytelling and story-based drama in supporting VYLs' use of formulaic chunks in English by formalizing the following research questions:

1) What is the impact of interactive storytelling combined with story-based drama activities on very young learners' use of formulaic language chunks in English?
2) What are the perspectives of VYLs regarding the intervention?

Method

Research Design

Using mixed methods enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of not only how language is used but also how learners feel about learning experiences, which are both essential for the language acquisition process (Dörnyei, 2007) Thus, this study followed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to get a more complete picture of the research topic and identify any similarities, differences, or contradictions in the findings (Greene, 2008). A quasi-experimental design with non-equivalent comparison groups was employed, as random assignment is not possible in public preschools.

Participants

A small public preschool, located within the university campus, was selected due to its convenience. The researcher, as a teacher educator, has been collaborating with this school for two years as part of a partnership between the Turkish Ministry of National Education and teacher education institutions to enable teacher trainees to perform their course, namely Community Service Practice. Thus, the researcher was already familiar with the teachers, administration, school environment, and student population. Since the classes were predetermined according to the learners' ages, the school administration did not deliberately select specific students for the study. Furthermore, the researcher provided equal attention to both groups when teaching English to reduce potential biases. Additionally, the rubrics were evaluated by three independent researchers who were blind to the group assignments, enhancing the credibility of the study's results.

Despite its small size, the school was well-kept, beautifully decorated, and equipped with several visual and hands-on materials as well as computers to engage students. Accordingly, the classrooms were designed with small, movable tables and chairs, creating flexible spaces for collaboration and active participation for the planned activities of the study. Appealing visuals, role-play corners, and accessible props like puppets and costumes made the classrooms optimal for games, interactive storytelling, and drama. This setup supports VYLs' developmental needs, allowing them to explore language through movement, role-play, and social interaction in an engaging and playful setting.

The current preschool program developed by the Ministry of Education highlights that the program for 37-61-month-old children is designed to support and speed up their development in all areas and to form the basis for

the education program of 61-72-month-old children. One of the aims of this program is to ensure that children speak Turkish correctly and beautifully (MEB, 2024). While there is a dedicated English language program for private preschools (MEB, 2024), public schools do not prioritize foreign language education (MEB, 2024).

The classes were grouped according to the students' ages, calculated by month. Since 5-year-old children were exposed to a FL before as they were taught English by ELT teacher trainees within the scope of the Community Service Course, this study was conducted with 4-year-old groups (48-60 months). As there were only two classes in this age group, the subjects were two intact groups, including the 4-year-old group called the *"star class"* as a control group, which was taught via several child-appropriate techniques such as songs, games, contextual listening and speaking activities, and the 4-year-old group called the *"moon class"* as an experimental group, which was given the intervention of interactive storytelling activity and story-based drama activities such as passive improvisation and role-play activities. Despite having 20 children in each group, not all were able to participate due to irregular attendance. As a result, the study included 17 participants in the control group (9 female, 8 male) and 19 participants in the experimental group (12 female, 7 male). Parents were asked to complete a consent form and answer questions about their child's English proficiency and exposure to English at home. The yes/no questions were related to whether their children watch videos, cartoons, or stories; sing songs; or play games in English, and whether they are exposed to English at home. Except for 6 children, all the parents reported that their children watch videos, cartoons, song-based videos, and live with people who know English. None of them listen to English stories, but some of them (N = 24) listen to English songs and play games (N = 15). They use only a few words about numbers, colours, and animals. Similarly, only a few of the chunks (Hello! / Good morning / my name is…) were used by some of them (N = 18). In conclusion, the theme "fruits" was found to be the most fitting theme for this study, as the children were not familiar with the related words and the target chunks.

The Intervention

After choosing the target theme as "the fruits," including 5 target words (strawberry, lemon, grapes, orange, banana, watermelon) and the target formulaic chunks as adjacency pairs (- Do you like apples? – Yes, I do, – No, I don't, and – What do you like? - I like apples, yummy! etc.), the lesson plans were prepared by the researcher and checked by an expert with a PhD in TEYLs to finalize them. The *"sun class,"* which had the closest age group to the intervention groups, was selected as the pilot class with 14 children aged 54 to 60 months. The researcher tested all the activities and materials with this class in 2 weeks to design the best form of the activities and timing. For instance, as VYLs had difficulty in dealing with multiple materials, fewer materials were used in the intervention. The intervention groups were taught English twice a week on the same days successively (minimum 35, maximum 50-minute daily sessions based on the activity types). Throughout weeks 1 and 2, the groups were exposed to the same English-based activities, which were designed to enhance their listening abilities (see Table 1). Accordingly, the materials for the song-based listening activity were wooden sticks with fruit pictures, food toy cutting fruit, a pretend fruit basket for playing vocabulary games, and real fruits to be used in a listen-speak-do activity (eating them to activate more senses). Table 1 displays the procedure of the intervention.

As displayed in Table 1, both groups began week 4 with a listen and colour activity as a warm-up part; however, they were taught differently afterwards. For instance, for the control group, the materials included a game board resembling a fruit garden, made of felt with a road and attachable fruits, besides an empty basket and a toy car to be used in the guided speaking activity. In another contextual speaking activity, the materials were toy fruits and real fruits that were peeled and cut, a basket with the fruits, a scarf, and flashcards hung on the children to be used in the blind man's buff, and a body to be completed with different fruit-shaped parts to be used in the dart game. For the experimental group, the materials were picture storybooks supported by the puppets, mirrors, and toys (Red Riding Hood/Saving Snow White/Fruitella). After participating in an interactive storytelling activity, they were assigned the story characters (the wolf, woodcutter, Red Riding Hood, grandma, Snow White, queen, witch, seven dwarfs, prince, Masha, and Fruitella) to act out as the teacher narrated the story, in addition to roleplaying them. In short, the materials, designed specifically for the learners, were chosen because they were concrete, engaging, and appealing to the target group. These materials and activities incorporated repetitive language chunks, creating a low-stress communicative environment and enhancing the memorability of the target chunks.

Data Collection Instruments and Analysis

Different data collection instruments were used to ensure credibility and confirmability of the findings, including video recording of the classes, speaking rubric, and the researcher's field notes. Since language learning skills should be assessed by engaging, interesting, fun, enjoyable, and age-appropriate activities, possibly incorporating game-like elements (Hasselgreen, 2005; Norasiah & Sugirin, 2023), the researcher prepared a contextual guided speaking activity with colourful and tactile materials (see Table 2) to assess learners' speech production. The speaking rubric (Table 3), based on the speaking activity and the descriptor (Table 4), was prepared by the researcher and was checked by the experts with PhDs in TEYLs and assessment in ELT to ensure content validity of the instruments by answering the questions by Selke (2013) to decide whether the rubric is a viable tool for this study.

After the children began colouring and cutting the fruit activity, the teacher interacted with each child individually

to assess their use of formulaic chunks to set the pre-assessment. The rubrics were filled in later by watching the video recordings. The Cronbach's alpha scores for the control group were as follows: pre-assessment .859, post-assessment .835, and delayed post-assessment .826 for the yes/no questions; and pre-assessment .829, post-assessment .843, and delayed post-assessment .792 for the wh-questions. As for the experimental group regarding the yes/no question, the Cronbach alpha scores for the pre-test were .844, post .756, and delayed post .754, and for the wh-questions, pre-assessment .851, post .781, and delayed post .783. As underlined by Selke (2013), rubrics, which are designed to provide feedback on ongoing progress, can also be used to assess final performance, as they help learners and teachers identify how learners did in specific parts of the task as well as understand the key components of the overall task. Since the same rubric could be used to assess learners' developing skills in different settings to display their progress (Selke, 2013), the same rubric was used three times to find out the effectiveness of the intervention on their language production. The participants' scores, based on the descriptors (see Table 3), were input into the statistical software SPSS. As the data violated the assumptions of normal distribution, which was confirmed through the Shapiro-Wilk test, the Mann-Whitney U test (a non-parametric statistical method) was employed to compare the scores between the two groups.

The rubrics were also scored by three different researchers: for the pre-assessments, rater 1 with an MA; for the post-assessments, rater 2 with an MA; and for the delayed assessments, rater 3 with a PhD. The Cohen's Kappa findings indicated moderate and strong agreement (McHugh, 2012) between the researcher and the raters (for the pre-assessment, 73%; post-assessment, 88%; and delayed post-assessment, 80% for the wh-questions; and pre-assessment, 86%; post-assessment, 95%; and delayed post-assessment, 94% for the yes/no questions).

Table 1. Description of the intervention

Groups	Week 1- 2	Week 3	Week 4-5-6	Week 7	Week 8-9	Week 10
Control group	Greetings, listening to the song, vocabulary and listening activities.	pre-assessment through the activity (Table 2)	Listening activities, game-based speaking activities contextual speaking activities,	post-assessment through the activity (Table 2)	No intervention	Out of class delayed post assessment through activity (Table 2)
Experimental group	Greetings, listening to the song, vocabulary and listening activities.	pre-assessment through the activity (Table 2)	Listening activities, interactive storytelling story-based drama activities (passive improvisation and role play).	post-assessment through the activity (Table 2)	No intervention	Out of class delayed post assessment through the activity (Table 2)

Table 2. The information regarding the guided speaking activity used in pre-post and delayed post assessment

Objectives	Materials	Context and Procedure
The student will be able to answer the teacher's questions, *"Do you like apples/strawberries/bananas?"* and pick up the fruits s/he likes from the trees by using the appropriate gestures (yummy/yucky).	Fruit trees made of cardboard and attachable paper fruits.	The teacher greets the students and checks their names. The teacher created an imaginary birthday party context via which the students were expected to pick up the fruits from the fruit garden to prepare their birthday cake as they answered the teacher's yes/no questions.
The student will be able to answer the teacher's questions, *"Do you like apples/strawberries/bananas?"* and pick up the fruits s/he likes from the trees by using the appropriate gestures (yummy/yucky).	A fake cake made of cardboard and attachable paper fruits.	The students decorate their birthday cakes based on their taste as they answer the teacher's questions

Table 3. The Sample Rubric Template to assess the participants' use of formulaic chunks.

Experimental Group / Class Moon ( ) Control Group/Class Star ( )						
The target chunk: - Yes/No question ( ) -Wh-question ( )	**Assessment Types**	**Descriptor (0)**	**Descriptor (1)**	**Descriptor (2)**	**Descriptor (3)**	**Descriptor (4)**
Student 1 (Name was written)	Pre Post Delayed					

Table 4. The descriptor used to complete the rubric to indicate the participants' use of the formulaic chunks.

Descriptors	
Outstanding (4)	The learner is able to produce total spontaneous responses fluently and accurately without waiting time and the teacher's support. The learner uses gestures and facial expressions to support what s/he's saying (yummy/yucky)
High quality production, very good (3)	The learner is able to produce total spontaneous responses fluently and accurately, but with a short wait time and the teacher's support (repeating the question). The learner is confident and uses non-linguistic competences to help communication.
Approaching good quality (2)	The learner is able to answer the teacher's questions in a complete and comprehensible way, but not very fluently, and with the teacher's support (wait time, repeating + prompting). The learner uses non-linguistic competences to help communication more than linguistic competences.
Needs improvement (1)	The learner produced only word-level answers (only the name of the fruit) rather than chunk-based responses (no use of subject + verb). The learner is able to answer the questions with the teacher's support (verbal prompting, providing a frame sentence) and sometimes with mistakes. Relies on non-linguistic competences to communicate.
Not acceptable (0)	The learner doesn't try to speak, repeating the teacher's question instead of answering the question / Total silence. Isn't able to communicate even with non-linguistic strategies.

Table 5. The results regarding "- Do you like?" chunks.

	TG	*N*	MR	SR	U	z	p	r
In-class pre-assessment	Control	17	19.76	336.00	140.000	-.769	.510	0.128
	Experimental	19	17.37	330.00				
In-class post-assessment	Control	17	17.18	292.00	139.000	-.785	.490	0.131
	Experimental	19	19.68	374.00				
Out-of-class delayed post assessment	Control	17	17.35	295.00	142.000	-.729	.552	0.121
	Experimental	19	19.53	371.00				

Note. IG = Intervention groups, MR = mean rank, SR = sum of ranks, Levels of significance *p < .05

After determining the codes deductively, themes were identified through inductive content analysis of the participants' expressions within the recordings. To verify the reliability of the coding process, a researcher with an MA in ELT reviewed them. The agreement rate was determined by comparing the number of times the researchers and the coder agreed on the codes to the total number of agreements and disagreements. It was found to be high for both codes (91%) and themes (88%), indicating a reliable coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

As Selke (2013) suggested, including a middle ground in a rubric can make assessment decisions less stressful, especially when considering developmental variations. A four- or five-column rubric is a good option for this. Thus, a five-column rubric was used in the study. Following the pilot implementation of the activity, the researcher designed the descriptor in Table 4 to address the different speaking levels of VYLs and their challenges.

Findings

The pre-test results in Tables 5 and 6 confirm the validity of the research procedures, as no significant differences were found between the groups' pre-scores. This similarity indicates that both groups started at comparable levels, ensuring that any observed differences in post-test scores can be attributed to the intervention rather than pre-existing disparities. Table 5 shows that there are no significant differences between the groups in the pre-, post-, and delayed assessment scores of the students regarding the use of formulaic chunks based on yes/no questions. To clarify, the use of interactive storytelling and story-based drama activities did not make any difference in VYLs' use of formulaic chunks based on yes/no questions.

Table 6 indicates that there are significant differences in the participants' post- and delayed assessment scores despite having no difference in their pre-assessment scores. The experimental group outperformed in both assessments due to the intervention. As seen in Table 7, the participants expressed excitement and engagement when they could explore and create when playing games, taking roles, and performing hands-on tasks, while some of them were reluctant to participate in physically demanding activities such as holding sticks or tracing. Tactile and real-life materials were also highly appreciated and made learning more concrete and enjoyable for them. In addition, the teacher's smiling and showing warmth were found important by them to foster positive attitudes towards the teacher and learning English. It was clear that exclusive use of English was initially difficult for students, leading to frustration as well as retaining new language vocabulary and structure.

Table 6. The results regarding "- What do you like?" chunks.

	TG	N	MR	SR	U	z	p	r
In-class pre-assessment	Control	17	17.24	293.00	140.000	-.825	.510	0.137
	Experimental	19	19.63	373.00				
In-class post-assessment	Control	17	13.94	237.00	84.000	-2.557	.013	0.426
	Experimental	19	22.58	429.00				
Out-of-class delayed post assessment	Control	17	13.59	231.00	78.000	-2.809	.007	0.468
	Experimental	19	22.89	435.00				

Note. IG = Intervention groups, MR = mean rank, SR = sum of ranks, Levels of significance *p < .05

Table 7. The qualitative results obtained from the video recordings.

Codes	Themes	Students' expressions
VYLs' Characteristics	Curiosity	"Who are you? What will you make us do?" (S8/E)
	Creativity	"Look! I am also designing a game like you." (S7/C)
	Being shy	"I was shy. I did not say. I did not want to be the wolf. I want to be the Red Riding Hood." (when answering her reason for not being involved in the activity/S2/E).
The teacher	Positive Attitudes	"Where have you been? (4 of the girls hugged me.) I like you! "(S4/E)
	Fun	"Are you leaving? Don't go! You are fun." (S11/C)
	Teacher talk	"Why are you talking differently? You are speaking well. Don't you know how to speak like us? (S8 /E)
	Methodology	"I'm really enjoying the English class. Your teaching is good." (S19/ E)
	Facial expression	"I like your smiling. I also like your face. You are teaching well". (S13/E)
Activities	Listen & do activity	"I like cutting the fruits. I also like colouring them." (S3/ C)
	Blind Man Buffs	"Always come here. Ok? Your games are good. "(S9/ C)
	Storytelling	"I like the story very much. I think it is very good. You teach us very well. It would be nice if you came every day ". (S5/E)
	Familiar story	"Aaaa! I know this story. Look! She will cut the wolf's belly (with an excited tone of voice and smiling facial expression)." (S11/E)
	Drama/role play	"I like to be the wolf. I like talking to you." (S9 /E)
Materials	Tactual materials	"I like fruit Velcro cutting toys. They make funny sounds." (S7/ C)
	Realia	"Strawberry is my favourite fruit. I like fruits. It is very delicious." (S2 /C)
	Ball	"I like playing with balls. I like the ball the most." (S13 /C)
VYLs' characteristics	Forget quickly	"I do not like English. I always forget everything. I do not remember it even for a day. I only know "I do not like and hello!". (S13 /E)
	Difficulty in handling the materials	"There are lots of sticks in front of me (N=6).
The teacher	Teacher talk	"Do you talk strangely to your children at home? That's too bad. (in the first lesson)". (S14/ E)
Activities	Listen-Trace and Colour	"I want to draw what I want, not the fruits." (S18/ E)
	Listen and Point	"This is not enjoyable. My arms are aching from holding up the sticks". (S9/ E)
	Singing the song	"I understand the lyrics. I know strawberry (instead of singing the song, 2 of the students try to show their understanding by talking to each other in Turkish"). (S8/ E)
Only English		"I do not understand what you are saying." (S4/ E)
	Classroom language (repeat after me! / Show the apple, etc.)	

Discussion and Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the impact of interactive storytelling and drama activities on VYLs' use of formulaic language chunks in English. The overall rubric scores indicated that VYLs in both groups improved in their use of formulaic language chunks. Studies have demonstrated that storytelling and drama improve oral production by encouraging learners to use formulaic chunks in a contextualized, low-pressure setting (As, 2016; Kara, 2022). This aligns with the findings of this case study, where interactive storytelling combined with drama activities had a more pronounced effect on oral production compared to game-based and contextual speaking activities, likely because these methods leverage narrative context and role-play, which match VYLs' natural tendencies for imaginative play and mimicry.

This study's one of the notable results is the differing effects of storytelling and drama on question types. This result might be attributed to the task complexity, as wh-questions require more cognitive processing, which demands learners to formulate their unique responses rather than merely confirming or denying as required in

simple 'yes/no' questions. Thus, this study indicated that stories that are memorable and concrete facilitated VYL's learning by reducing their cognitive load through organizing lessons and clarifying instructions and enhancing information processing through meaningful engagement within story- and drama-based activities, which is consistent with Bolkan (2021). In addition, aligned with skill acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2007), the experimental group's superior result in the delayed post-test appears to be a consequence of the group's better adaptation to the English-only instruction by the teacher that facilitated their automatization of speaking skills.

To effectively enhance VYLs' oral production, the study underscores the importance of carefully selecting activities based on their impact. While games and contextual speaking activities are suitable for teaching short chunks, such as answering yes/no questions, the findings strongly recommend prioritizing interactive storytelling and drama activities for developing more advanced speaking skills. As reported by Çelik Korkmaz (2021), effective and engaging storytelling should include some key elements such as tone of voice, mimicry, gestures, and interaction skills. Hence, the intervention's positive outcomes can be attributed to the researcher's ability to tell engaging stories using various techniques, such as voice, mimicry, gestures, and interaction. Furthermore, as highlighted by Ghosn (2016), who recommended incorporating more engaging materials like nursery rhymes, songs, chants, and picture books, which are designed to be multi-modal in TEVYLs, the themes in the qualitative findings revealed the VYLs' positive attitudes towards the multi-modal activities and materials used in the study, which is in line with the YLs in the study by Çelik Korkmaz and Karatepe (2021). As also suggested by Reynolds et al. (2021), story corners can be created in VYL classrooms by displaying story-related pictures, using character puppets, and providing props for dramatic play, as they can enhance both speaking and social skills.

In agreement with As (2016), the VYLs fostered mostly positive attitudes towards the techniques used in both groups. Negative themes that emerged from the qualitative part were mainly about listening skills and the use of only English by the teacher. At the initial stages of instruction, when learners were first exposed to English in the school setting, the unfamiliarity with the new language created feelings of discomfort and anxiety, as learners struggled to understand instructions and communicate effectively. However, while they initially expressed a preference for using their native language to aid comprehension and reduce stress, they gradually adapted to the English-only instruction. Interestingly, despite their initial hesitation, they did not strongly resist the exclusive use of English, showing some openness and willingness to adapt to the immersive learning approach as they became more familiar with the new environment. This adaptation, which aligns with Song and Lee (2019), highlights the importance of providing support and scaffolding during the early stages of exposure to a new language. Hence, the study indicated that training the ear by developing receptive skills before productive skills, as well as boosting a positive motivation to FL learning, should be the primarily important roles of teachers (Edelenbos et al., 2006).

Implications and Limitations

Although English teacher training programs in Türkiye include courses on teaching young learners (TEYLs), they lack specific training for very young learners (TEVYLs). Despite some similarities, VYLs require distinct approaches, making it challenging for YL-experienced teachers to adapt. Based on the field notes, here are the recommendations for teaching VYLs:

- Given their curiosity, the first step for teachers is to address the question, "Who is this person?" to build positive attitudes toward the teacher and language learning. To achieve this, teachers should be energetic, friendly, and positive.
- Gradually introduce shy learners to activities by starting with low-pressure roles or tasks and building their confidence through encouragement and positive reinforcement.
- If teachers expect VYLs to be involved in the activities, they are to be sure that they are accepted by the students and build positive connections with them (I was lucky as it took 30 minutes to achieve this).
- With classrooms full of colourful and tactile materials, effective teaching techniques matter more than the materials. Ultimately, the teacher is the most important resource.
- Because VYLs struggle to coordinate the use of various materials, the activity should employ a small number of simple and attractive materials.
- Teacher talk is paramount. Not only what is said but also how it is said, through tone, gestures, facial expressions, body language, and even mouth movements, are essential for effective teaching.
- VYLs take time to engage in interactive conversations and produce accurate answers, often repeating what they hear. Therefore, repetition, prompting, and visual support should be the primary techniques to encourage speaking.
- There should be a supportive teacher or personnel to help an English teacher to be able to use only English throughout the lesson (I got support from the pre-school teacher).
- VYLs are not ready for a very structured layout of the lesson plan; thus, teachers should be flexible.
- The seating arrangement should also be flexible to get the optimal benefit from the activity (for instance, a U shape for the interactive storytelling process).

- If teachers use appropriate supportive strategies, VYLs can keep their attention for longer periods throughout teacher-guided interactive whole-class activities. (For instance, they could keep their attention, interest, and motivation for about 20 minutes during the interactive storytelling process.).
- For the student-centred activities, VYLs should not be expected to listen to each other, be silent, and sit still for a longer period. Instead, they need to be involved in individualized, engaging, and interesting activities.

In short, improperly educating VYLs at the start of their foreign language journey might hinder their learning cognitively, emotionally, and psychologically. Alternatively, using age-appropriate methods like interactive storytelling and drama can help VYLs develop their speaking abilities.

As a single-case study in a small public preschool, the findings are context-specific, with variations in resources, teacher skills, and learners, limiting generalizability. This aligns with Yin's (2018) view that case studies offer in-depth insights rather than broad generalizations. Since the teacher in this study is an expert with a PhD in TEYLs, the teacher's expertise might also be a key factor in the success of interactive storytelling and drama activities on the learners' use of formulaic chunks successfully, making direct replication challenging. Thus, future research could enhance generalizability by involving teachers with different skills, expanding the sample size through including more schools and examining diverse settings to reflect variations in learners and environments.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest and Funding

This study had no funding, and there is no conflict of interest.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

The study was conducted after receiving the approval from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Bursa Uludağ University dated 29.09.2023 and numbered 08. Furthermore, the author guarantees the study was conducted after getting consent approval from each participant's parents. In addition, this work is a fresh contribution to the field and has not been published somewhere before.

Genişletilmiş Özet

Giriş

Birçok ülkede birincil yabancı dil olarak erken yaşta İngilizce eğitimine başlansa da bu ülkelerdeki herkesin İngilizceyi akıcı bir şekilde konuştuklarını söyleyemeyiz (Tuzcu Eken, 2021). Erken yaşta yabancı dil öğrenen öğrenciler doğaları gereği meraklı ve konuşkandırlar. Bir dili parça parça kavramaktan ziyade bütünsel kalıplar halinde öğrenirler. Fakat yabancı bir dilde kalıplaşmış parçaları tanıma konusunda iyi olsalar da bunları doğru bir şekilde kullanmaları, bu hedef kalıpları nasıl pratik ettikleri ve dilbilgisi becerilerini nasıl geliştirdikleriyle paralel olarak, daha uzun zaman alabilir (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2017). Mart ve ark. (2016) tarafından Türkiye'deki 131 anaokulu öğretmeniyle yapılan bir çalışma, yaş, okul tipi, deneyim yılları ve eğitim farklılıklarına rağmen, hepsinin anaokulunda İngilizce öğretilmesine olumlu tutumlar sergilediğini ortaya koydu.

Öğretmenlerin, İngilizce kalıpsal yapıları kullanmayı doğru bir şekilde öğretmeleri, erken yaşta İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin akıcı bir şekilde konuşmalarını önemli ölçüde geliştirir, bu da özgüvenlerini artırmalarına ve konuşma kaygılarını azaltmalarına yardımcı olur (Mohammadi & Enavati, 2018). Kısacası, okul öncesi İngilizce öğretmenleri tarafından oluşturulan sınıf ortamı ve öğretim teknikleri, öğrencilerin kalıplaşmış dil yapılarını doğru bir şekilde kullanmalarını desteklemek için oldukça önemlidir. Bu doğrultuda, şarkı, oyun, hikâye ve drama gibi çok çeşitli tekniklerin arasında bu çalışma erken yaşta İngilizce öğrenen okul öncesi çocuklarının İngilizce dil kalıplarını kullanmalarını desteklemede hangi tekniğin daha etkili olduğunu belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla şu araştırma soruları oluşturulmuştur:

1) İnteraktif hikâye anlatımı ve drama etkinliklerinin erken yaşta İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin kalıplaşmış dil yapılarını kullanmaları üzerindeki etkisi nedir?
2) Erken yaşta İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin müdahale programıyla ilgili görüşleri nelerdir?

Yöntem

Bu çalışmada hem nicel hem de nitel araştırma yöntemlerini birleştiren karma yöntem yaklaşımı izlendi. Ayrıca, bu çalışma, eğitim öğretim sürecinde rastgele atama mümkün olmadığından, eşdeğer olmayan karşılaştırma grupları tasarımı ile yarı deneysel bir araştırma tipi olarak tasarlandı. Bu kurumda 2 tane (sınıf mevcudu: 20) 4 yaş grubu bulunduğu için bir sınıf kontrol bir sınıf da deney grubu olarak belirlendi. Devamsızlığı çok olan öğrenciler çalışmadan çıkarıldığı için bu çalışmaya kontrol grubundan 17 kişi deney grubundan 19 kişi katılmıştır. Kontrol grubunda dinleme, şarkı, oyun ve bağlam içinde konuşma etkinlikleri yapılırken deney grubunda interaktif hikâye anlatımı ve sonrasında hikâye temelli donmuş görüntü oluşturma ve rol yapma gibi drama etkinlikleri yapılmıştır. "Güneş sınıfı" olarak adlandırılan sınıf, en yakın yaş grubuna sahip olduğundan, 54-60 ay arası 14 çocukla pilot sınıf olarak seçildi. Araştırmacı, bu sınıf ile tüm etkinlikleri ve materyalleri iki hafta boyunca (müdahaleden bir hafta önce) test etti. Öğretmen ve öğrencilerden geri bildirim toplayarak etkinliklerin en iyi biçimini tasarladı ve her etkinlik için tahmini süreyi planladı. Ayrıca, uzmanlardan geri bildirim aldıktan sonra, veri toplama yöntemlerinin geçerliliğini tespit etmek için çalışmayı uygulamadan önce rehberli konuşma etkinliği sırasında veri toplama araçlarının pilot çalışmasını gerçekleştirdi ve rubriğin uygulanabilirliğinden emin oldu.

Bulguların güvenilirliği ve doğrulanabilirliğini sağlamak için farklı veri toplama araçları kullanıldı, bunlar arasında derslerin video kaydı, konuşma rubriği ve araştırmacının saha notları yer almaktadır. Araştırmacı hedef kitleye yönelik olarak, kalıplaşmış İngilizce yapıları kullanmalarını değerlendirmek üzere, renkli ve dokunsal materyallerin (bkz. tablo 2) kullanıldığı, bağlam içinde geçen anlamlı bir konuşma etkinliği hazırladı. Çocuklar bireysel etkinlik yaparken araştırmacı bir çocuğa odaklanarak sınıf içi konuşmaları ve gecikmeli ölçüm için de çocukları tek tek hikâye odasına çağırarak sınıf dışı konuşma etkinliğini gerçekleştirdi.

Sonuç ve Öneriler

Mann- Whitney U testi sonucuna göre öğrencilerin evet/hayır sorularına dayalı kalıplaşmış dil öbeklerini kullanmaları açısından ön, son ve gecikmeli değerlendirme puanları arasında gruplar arasında anlamlı farklar oluşmadığı ortaya çıkmıştır. Diğer taraftan, ön test sonuçları iki grup arasında açık uçlu sorulara (wh-questions) cevap vermede anlamlı bir fark göstermese de son ve gecikmeli değerlendirme skorları iki grup arasında deney grubu lehine anlamlı farklar olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu da etkileşimli hikâye anlatımı ve hikâye temelli drama tekniklerinin diğer konuşma etkinlikleri ve oyun temelli konuşma etkinliklerine göre konuşma becerilerine daha fazla katkı sağladığını göstermiştir. Araştırmacının alan notları göz önüne alındığında okul öncesi İngilizce öğretmenlerine aşağıdaki öneriler verilebilir:

- Çok küçük yaş grubu öğrenciler çok meraklı oldukları için, bir öğretmenin pozitif tutumlar geliştirmek için aklındaki 'o kim?' sorusunu yanıtlaması gerekir.
- Öğretmenler öğrencilerin etkinliklere dahil olmasını bekliyorsa, öğrenciler tarafından kabul edildiklerinden ve onlarla olumlu bir bağ kurduklarından emin olmalıdırlar (Bunu başarmak için şanslıydım, 30 dakika sürdü).
- Her yer renkli ve dokunsal malzemelerle kaplı olduğundan, öğretmenlerin doğru teknikleri kullanması, malzemelerin kendilerinden daha önemlidir. Buna göre, en önemli malzeme öğretmendir.
- Çok küçük yaş grubu öğrenciler çeşitli malzemelerin kullanımını koordine etmekte zorlandıkları için, etkinlikte az sayıda basit ve çekici malzeme kullanılmalıdır.
- Öğretmen konuşması çok önemlidir. Sadece ne söylendiği değil, aynı zamanda tonlama, jestler, yüz ifadeleri, beden dili ve hatta ağız hareketleri de etkili öğretim için önemlidir.
- Etkin konuşmalara dahil olmak zaman alır (söylediklerinizi tekrarlama eğilimindedirler) ve doğru cevaplar üretmek zaman alır. Bu nedenle, öğrencilerin konuşmasına yardımcı olmak için en sık kullanılan destekleyici teknikler, görsel destekle birlikte tekrar ve teşvik olmalıdır.
- Bir İngilizce öğretmenin ders boyunca sadece İngilizce kullanabilmesi için destekleyici bir öğretmen veya personel olmalıdır (ben, okul öncesi öğretmeni tarafından desteklendim).
- Çok küçük yaş grubu öğrenciler çok yapılandırılmış bir ders planı düzenine hazır değiller; bu nedenle, öğretmenler esnek olmalıdır.
- Oturma düzeni de etkinlikten en iyi şekilde yararlanmak için esnek olmalıdır (örneğin, etkileşimli hikâye anlatımı süreci için U şekli gibi.
- Öğretmenler uygun destekleyici stratejiler kullanırlarsa, öğrenciler öğretmen rehberliğinde etkileşimli tüm sınıf etkinlikleri boyunca daha uzun süre dikkatlerini tutabilirler (örneğin, etkileşimli hikâye anlatımı sürecinde yaklaşık 20 dakika dikkatlerini, ilgilerini ve motivasyonlarını koruyabilirler).
- Öğrenci merkezli etkinlikler için çok küçük yaş grubu öğrencilerin birbirlerini dinlemeleri, sessiz olmaları ve uzun süre hareketsiz oturmaları beklenmemelidir. Bunun yerine, bireyselleştirilmiş, ilgi çekici ve eğlenceli etkinliklere dahil olmaları gerekir.

Kısacası, okul öncesi gruplara İngilizce eğitimini yanlış uygulamak, bilişsel, duygusal ve psikolojik olarak öğrenmelerini engelleyebilir. Diğer taraftan, hikâye anlatımı ve drama gibi etkinlikler yoluyla İngilizce öğretmek, onların konuşma becerilerini geliştirebilir.

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