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Using games and ludic activities in children's EFL learning: the importance and the challenges during the pandemic.

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis is to evaluate how much games and ludic activities are integrated in the EFL scenario that will be examined as well as whether activities usually carried out in presence are easy to carry out also in an online learning setting.

Chapter 1 will review the literature about the use of games in teaching and the importance of playing in language learning, not only during childhood but also with teenagers and adults, highlighting some important aspects that must be taken into consideration while playing, such as social interaction, the learning environment, the variety and authenticity of language and materials, the role of emotions and motivation and how they affect learning. Furthermore, the role of games in learning, the importance of using all five senses, body movement, verbal and non-verbal languages will be presented, mentioning also an approach used in ludic language learning, that is, the Total Physical Response (TPR). Finally, the role that teachers hold in this student-centred learning will be discussed, as well as the advantages and benefits that games add to traditional learning, and some studies on the introduction of games and playful activities in the classroom will be presented.

Chapter 2 will present the study carried out on a project of English language learning using games. Data for the study have been collected through an interview with the teacher that is working on the project. The questions concern the structure of a lesson, the kinds of activities and games chosen, and the challenges faced during the pandemic as to teaching and learning organization. It will also present the main findings resulting from the analysis of the data collected from the teacher's answers.

Chapter 3 will discuss the data collected and they will be examined in order to answer the research questions. Chapter 4 will summarise all the topics that have been covered in this thesis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Playing has always had an important role in learning how to act in everyday life's situations, starting from a very young age. Although games and ludic activities are indeed considered fundamental for children's social and cognitive growth, they aren't considered as important for language learning in school, especially for teenagers and adult learners. Fortunately, more and more teachers are introducing games and ludic activities in their lessons, in particular in foreign language (FL) and second language (L2) learning.

The ludic language learning approach realises in operative models and language learning techniques the founding principles of the humanistic-affective and communicative approaches (Caon & Rutka, 2004). In Italy, the humanistic approach is linked to Freddi and Titone, who, in their work, considered psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics important for language teaching and learning (Balboni, 2014). According to the humanistic-affective approach, the person's affective and personality features, and their cognitive aspects as well, affect in a decisive way the learning process (Lombardo, 2006). Because of this, every person will learn in a different way from the other, as stated by Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (1983) that affirms that each person has seven (or nine) different intelligences which are combined differently depending on personal, environmental and cultural factors (Balboni, 2018). It is important that learning takes place in a positive, relaxing and motivating environment since, in situations of stress and anxiety, the brain activates the affective filter which doesn't allow for lasting acquisition but only a temporary learning (Lombardo, 2006). Games and ludic activities are helpful in order for learning to take place because, according to Krashen's rule of forgetting, while playing the learners forget that they are actually studying because their focus isn't on the learning part; instead, they are focused on playing the game, promoting unconscious learning (Lombardo, 2006). Krashen also states that acquisition takes place following a specific direction, that is the natural order of acquisition, where the newly acquired element is located immediately after the already interiorised ones; games are a perfect tool to carry out activities inspired by the Natural Approach, which states that in every language learning process there is a natural development in progression, made of different moments (Balboni, 2014 and Lombardo, 2006). It is extremely important that the student is fully, actively involved in the learning process because in the humanistic-affective approach, unlike traditional learning, learners lead their own learning (Lombardo, 2006). The Communicative Approach states that the language's first function is to communicate; language is action, you do with the language, with the purpose of achieving a goal (Balboni, 2014). Playing highlights the communicative function of the language, putting in front the learner's linguistic and communicative demands (Lombardo, 2006).

In the past years more and more teachers adopted an approach based on games and ludic activities in their lessons, and this way of learning a language has been widely studied recently, in terms of efficacy of acquisition, students' enjoyment of using games in class, motivation and participation levels, stress and anxiety levels. The studies presented in this work agree on the fact that games are beneficial both for language acquisition and for the students' personal and social growth (Wang et al. 2006; Griva & Semoglu 2012; Diaz & Dimitrakis 2019; Kangas 2009; Racina 2013; González 2010, just to name a few). The research results have been positive also about the increase of self-efficacy, motivation and involvement during the lessons when using games, as well as the reduction of stress and performance anxiety due to peer pressure (Wang et al. 2006; Griva & Semoglu 2012; Passiatore et al. 2019). Activities such as group exercises, games, singing songs, were found to be extremely helpful in reducing anxiety and enhancing motivation and interest during the lesson (Kangas 2009: Passiatore et al. 2019; Rivera & Solange 2016). Games and ludic activities are undoubtedly a valuable tool for practice since, while students are playing, they are able to practice speaking, reading, writing and listening without the anxiety and stress that traditional exercises may convey (Racina 2013; Rivera & Solange 2016). The activities presented in class must be engaging and

varied, in order to avoid boredom and facilitate the students' active participation during the lesson (Campoverde Conforme 2018; Paguay 2019).

The case study that will be presented here is an example of how games can be integrated in learning English as a foreign language from a young age. The decision to choose this theme for this work came about after having experienced the use of a ludic activities-based approach during a curricular internship few years ago. The EFL project involved EFL learning and working with children, between the ages of 3 and 13, who were taught English by using games, songs, rhymes, manual laboratories, storytelling and so on.

Firstly, an overview of the existing literature on the use of ludic activities and games in language learning will be presented and, secondly, data from a research study will be discussed, about the use these activities with kindergarteners, children and pre-teens. The objective of the study was to evaluate to what extent are games and ludic activities integrated in the EFL scenario examined as well as whether these activities, usually carried out in presence, are easy to accomplish also in an online learning setting. Research data have been collected by interviewing an English teacher about, among other topics, the activities presented, the structure of the lessons, the differences between using games and ludic activities in an in presence setting versus in an online setting.

Chapter 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will review the literature about the use of games in teaching and the importance of playing in language learning for practicing real-life situations, highlighting some important aspects that must be taken into consideration while playing, such as social interaction (paragraph 1.1.1), the learning environment (paragraph 1.1.2), the variety and authenticity of language and materials (paragraph 1.1.3), the role of emotions and motivation and how they affect learning (paragraph 1.1.4). Furthermore, the role of games in learning and the advantages they bring (paragraph 1.2.1), the importance of using all five senses, body movement, verbal and non-verbal languages will be presented, mentioning also an approach used in ludic language learning, that is, the Total Physical Response (TPR) (paragraph 1.1.5). Finally, the role of teachers in this student-centred learning will be discussed (paragraph 1.2.3) and some studies on the use of games and playful activities in the classroom will be presented (paragraph 1.2.2).

1.1 Ludic activities-based approach

The use of ludic activities in language learning is strictly connected to the Humanistic-affective approach (Daloiso, 2006). Playing involves the learner actively in the learning process, being dynamic and productive in building knowledge and learning by doing (Ostorero, 2021). The game-based approach assigns a strategic value to games, in order to achieve linguistic and educational objectives (Daloiso, 2006). Games become a meaningful experience for learners, completely involving them through a variety of stimuli provided (Ostorero, 2021). The main principles that characterise this approach are: the attention given to students and their affective, communicative and cognitive needs; the importance given to motivation, considered the key to activate language learning processes; the creation of language learning designs that respect the natural language acquisition process; the respect and knowledge of the learners' different cognitive and learning styles; the consideration of the language as a means for

communication, socialization and personal growth (Daloiso, 2006). The ludic activity-based approach maintains its key aspects while also varying its tools according to the educational needs, in order to adapt the games to the specific characteristics of each context or class (Ostorero, 2021).

Playing is unquestionably considered an important part of everyone's life, since it contributes to the physical, social and cognitive growth of children (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). «The playful dimension of games gives the child the opportunity to put himself in relationship with the real world» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 34), and this relationship allows the child to explore and discover the real world by experiencing it through games, role plays, play pretend, and so on. Since playing is predominantly present during childhood, it is a common mistake to think that the game-based approach can be used only with children. Instead, games can be used to learn a language at any age, because the majority of people love playing, whether they are young or old. As Vygotskji stated, «playing, although it is a prominent and specific function of childhood, is protracted for the whole life» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 17). Playing is important because it leads to a natural discovery and learning of the language.

According to Sugar (1998), teaching has progressed and transformed significantly over the years. Learners aren't passive listeners that assimilate the notions that the teacher imparts them anymore, but they are becoming more and more active in their own learning and in the classroom, «and what better way to be active than by playing games» (1998: 3, cited in Sigurðardóttir, 2010: 7). The introduction of more creative and playful activities in learning instead of more traditional learning methods[1] seems to have increased the students' desire to study, mostly because, according to Kangas (2009), learners are allowed to use their imagination, and are encouraged to do so, instead of only using textbooks to study. Despite that, many teachers still think about games as «fillers», not identifying them as a learning methodology that can lead to a steady, long-lasting and deep language acquisition (Caon & Rutka, 2004). Games should be used in learning because they give confidence, amuse and teach; on top of that, they help learners to «see the beauty in a foreign language and not just problems that at times seem overwhelming» (Uberman, 1994: 3).

De Rossi (2008) states that there is no division between playing and learning, since games have an enormous potential in learning, especially «knowledge, abilities and competences, in developing the student's own identity, social relationships and in interiorising rules and values» (De Rossi, 2008: 1). Moreover, games are an extremely important tool to enhance motivation towards learning. During the learning process, the emotional and affective components, the body/movement components and the experience component must be integrated within the cognitive one, significantly influencing motivation, learning and self-growth (De Rossi, 2008). According to Diaz & Dimitrakis (2019), games are considered to be the best method to use to learn a language nowadays, because they introduce a real situation that gives players a perfect reason to use English; they can be considered «a communication vehicle with a playful and didactic purpose» (Diaz & Dimitrakis, 2019: 41). Language learning has improved thanks to the use of games, which are «activities specifically aimed at the language learning that have as main rule to speak the language» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 35). The need for communication

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[1] Traditional learning is a type of learning that takes place in class, with the teacher being the primary source of learning together with textbooks. Students learn grammar and vocabulary by listening to the teacher and then by doing exercises and tests to verify their learning status.

during games, and the informal setting they offer, encourages students to talk without fear, allowing them to practice their fluency (Sigurðardóttir, 2010).

1.1.1 The importance of social interaction

«Language grows and develops with the child who, by using it, interacts with the environment, focusing more on the meaning of his messages rather than on their form» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 24).

Playing, first of all, leads to the discovery and to the assimilation of the real world, allowing to practice situations and behaviours used in everyday's life without the consequences they would have in real life (Caon & Rutka, 2004). Playing can also be considered a tool for social interaction; in games, there is an encounter with the other person through conversation which leads to the learning of mutual respect and of the rules of the game, as well as to the growth and development of the person (Caon & Rutka, 2004). Diaz & Dimitrakis (2019) stated that using games in the classroom can be beneficial because, along with being motivating and challenging, they are a suitable tool in order to practice the four main linguistic skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). Games also are a good way to encourage students to interact and communicate with one another, creating a meaningful setting where they can use the language. It is essential to create «situations where interaction builds up spontaneously», where children really have something meaningful to say to each other, instead of just repeating sentences or words (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 36). Therefore, they can recycle, helped by their imagination, a sentence or even just a word they have already practiced, but in a more formal way (Caon & Rutka, 2004). An advantage of games is that they are good for shy students and students with low confidence. When playing takes place in groups, they get a chance to speak in front of a smaller audience instead of having to speak in front of the whole class (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). The more relaxed atmosphere that characterises games and the fact that more emphasis is put on fluency rather than on grammatical correctness gives shy or insecure students enough confidence to express themselves and their opinions (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). Therefore, games can help overcome embarrassment and shyness and, at the same time, value the learners' intellective diversity, encouraging them to express their creativity, imagination and fantasy when playing (Lombardo, 2006). Language becomes a social action in games because, when they play, learners learn the language and learn to act with the language too. When playing games, students are emotionally involved, helping acquisition to take place and easing language learning (Caon & Rutka, 2004). When playing, the context created is authentic, and the use of language in it is useful and significant (since, in order to play, one must understand what the other players are saying and be able to efficiently communicate with the group) (Lombardo, 2006). Within the group, there is a continuous negotiation of meanings, and learners have the chance to check immediately the effective comprehension (their own and of the others) and solve those comprehension problems by elaborating autonomous and varied strategies to be understood, and the other members of the group will do likewise (Caon & Rutka, 2004).

1.1.2 The importance of the learning environment

In playing games, the person is influenced mostly by the simple pleasure of playing; the environment should be calm and non-anxiogenic in order to «encourage autonomous explorative behaviours correlated to games, converting them in useful actions to inspire fantasy and creativity» (De Rossi, 2008: 4). Students who play and study in a relaxing and positive atmosphere are able to learn more efficiently, have fun and develop social abilities such as interaction with others, mediation and competitiveness (Lombardo, 2006). Von Humboldt states that «a language can't be taught, but conditions can be created for a language to be learnt» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 25). It is important that the classroom, or any space where learning takes place, is stimulating. It can be achieved through decorations (posters, pictures, drawings) or by playing some background music while working. According to De Rossi (2008), the environment should be structured with materials and objects that enhance the willingness to participate, and the space should be big enough to allow free movement inside it. Playing in a natural and reassuring environment not only facilitates learning, but also «allows the meeting, the mutual knowledge of the other and the relationship with the other» (1990: 141, cited in Caon & Rutka, 2004: 36). According to Vygotskij, playing is a zone of proximal development (ZPD) because, when playing, «the child behaves always on top of his everyday's behaviour»; games are, therefore, a main source of development (De Rossi, 2008: 6). In addition, the environment should allow learners to be emotionally involved in motivating activities where the language is discovered through games. These activities are tied to the students' interests and abilities, and the language practiced through them can be used in the future for meaningful purposes (Caon & Rutka, 2004).

1.1.3   The importance of variety and authenticity

«Education does not need to be boring; it can be fun», and variation in the activities proposed is a good starting point (Diaz & Dimitrakis, 2019: 20). Games connect students with the ultimate goal of going to school, which is acquiring knowledge; it is important that students have fun and learn through games because, otherwise, there is no educational improvement (Diaz & Dimitrakis, 2019). The activities proposed in the game-based approach are activities that are close to the children's most natural and spontaneous interests, such as drawing, memorising and repeating rhymes, singing, dancing, listening to stories, imagining and using their fantasy, miming and role playing, imitating and creatively re-elaborating the language, playing with it, discovering its rules, sounds etc (Caon & Rutka, 2004).

Begotti (2007) states that, by using playful activities, the teacher can support the use of different cognitive and learning styles as well as of different types of intelligences, allowing children to express themselves, their emotions, feelings, intentions, in a way that is natural for them. Freddi (1990) states that, in ludic language learning, it is fundamental to include all five senses in the learning process, in order to make it more productive and complete (Caon & Rutka, 2004). Movement is also very important, whether it is moving the body to the rhythm of a song, using gestures while speaking or mimicking a word or concept children can't express through the language yet. Learners must engage in relationships with people their age, and with older people too, by using the language, since «language is a social action; it allows people to do things» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 23). The language must be as authentic as possible and should generate from situations and activities where children actively do, act, play, and must have an immediate communicative purpose directly linked to their interests (Caon & Rutka, 2004). Problem

solving activities in group are a perfect example of authentic language use, because these activities encourage the search for logic and creative solutions by using specific communicative strategies leading, as just said, to an authentic use of the language (Caon & Rutka, 2004). «Leading figures» (mascots, puppets…) that conventionally speak the target language can be used as a game, and children, in order to be able to communicate with them, must talk to them only in the target language. Once again, the linguistic material around whom interest is created must be authentic; it could be, for example, the one of the daily routine, which underlines and repeats actions in a natural way both in everyday's life or in a school setting (Caon & Rutka, 2004).

1.1.4 The importance of emotions and motivation

Learning depends on how active the students' participation is, and emotional and motivational factors play an important role in the effectiveness of learning; anxiety, stress, fear, or, enjoyment, serenity and fun, affect differently the student's learning process (Caon & Rutka, 2004). Learners must be emotionally involved while exposed to the language. Strong emotions (such as happiness, excitement, amusement and suspense) allow students to feel positive about their learning situation and, as a consequence, it is more likely for them to affect language learning positively (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). Furthermore, these positive emotions, together with the learners' curiosity and enthusiasm towards something new, can have an impact on students' motivation, significantly enhancing it (Griva & Semoglou, 2012). «A motivated student is a person that becomes active due to a need, a desire, a particular interest or an external cause and follows a particular path to achieve a goal» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 19). Since motivation and a positive attitude are central to learning, the major concern is how to keep students' motivation and attention high throughout the whole lesson. Ludic activities raise interest and desire to learn, since they leverage on intrinsic motivation based on curiosity and pleasure, maintaining interest and willingness to learn high and long-lasting (Lombardo, 2006).

Students use the language while playing a game in order to finish it and win. Thus, students are focused on playing the game and forget that they are learning the language, and it is in this moment that Krashen's Rule of forgetting takes place. Learners learn a language faster, easier and better when they forget they are learning it, that is, «when their attention is on the meaning conveyed by the language rather than on the linguistic form» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 25).

1.1.5 TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE

American psychologist J. Asher (1977) developed a methodology called Total Physical Response (TPR). It is a method through which a language is taught by using physical activities, and it is particularly used in foreign and second language learning. By using TPR, students answer to a verbal request, order or question in a physical way, by moving and using their body language and gestures instead of talking. In so doing, they can pay more attention on what the teacher is saying instead of being constantly concerned about putting words together to build a correct verbal answer (Diaz & Dimitrakis, 2019). TPR is extremely useful and effective especially during the first phases of language learning, since there is a respect of the student's learning times and

rhythms and of the «silence phase», that is when the student isn't ready to produce language yet (Caon & Rutka, 2004). It is extremely important that students aren't forced to produce language ahead of time, because it could result in a mental block that, by activating the affective filter, would make any effort to learn useless. An advantage of TPR is that it allows teachers to immediately check the comprehension level of the linguistic input, and at the same time allows students, by interacting with their classmates, to have immediate feedback of their own performance. In addition, making mistakes isn't experienced in an anxiogenic way; instead, it is seen as an opportunity to learn from those errors, helped by the other students in the class (Caon & Rutka, 2004). TPR also allows students to directly experience the language, since «language directly acts on learners' muscles and senses, fixating on something that is interiorised without the need of boring repetitions» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 38). The language does that by trying to simulate the unconscious processes used when L1 is learnt (activating mainly the right hemisphere of the brain), which don't disappear after L1 is acquired, but continue to operate when that person, child or adult, tries to learn another language (Caon & Rutka, 2004).

TPR can be a great source of motivation for students to learn the English language, especially in order to acquire new vocabulary and grammatical structures or to revise old ones (Diaz & Dimitrakis, 2019). It is effective because it imitates, in a faster way, how L1 is learnt (Caon & Rutka, 2004). «In TPR, the teacher's input can be a simple invitation, a command or an instruction to do something […], or longer and more complex sequences of instructions» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 38). It is particularly useful to use TPR in education, since the language of the school routine mostly consists of imperatives, which makes the context and the physical responses more authentic, enabling the learner to do with the language, to act, to experience the language through inputs that activate more senses at the same time (Caon & Rutka, 2004).

1.2 The role of games in language learning

«Language learning techniques are playful activities, structured, with a high educational value, specifically aimed at the acquisition, practice and creative use of the language in meaningful environments» (1998, cited in Caon & Rutka, 2004: 32).

Those activities are called games because they have some features that make them playful: they are motivating, challenging, stimulating, they give the illusion that the game is freely chosen by learners even if it is not. Students are so captivated by them that allow linguistic acquisition to take place. Materials typical of games can be added in these activities, allowing students to do, to experiment, to use verbal and non-verbal languages through songs, rhymes, role plays, mime and so on (Caon & Rutka, 2004). By using the language in a spontaneous way, real-life situations are replicated (Þórisdóttir, 2020). The main reason that brings people to learn a language is to be able to use it in real situations, especially when travelling. As previously stated, games can be used to re-enact different real-life situations, allowing the students to practice fluency, while being on the frontline of their own learning, instead of the teacher being the major source of learning (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). By creating fictional scenarios for practice, learners are supported in using the target language in a more realistic and natural way, «practicing meaningful vocabulary and expressions» (Þórisdóttir, 2020: 13). Along with that, games can fulfil the students' need to be exposed to the language in various situations, providing meaningful context where students can practice the target language and acquire it unconsciously,

since students will use that specific vocabulary or those structures simply to be able to play and win the game (Sigurðardóttir, 2010 and Rivera & Solange, 2016). Games can be considered a good teaching methodology, since they demand for communication, emphasising fluency instead of accuracy. Students should feel encouraged to communicate because, when the emphasis is on fluency, students usually do not receive much criticism on grammar and language structures, hence they don't feel threatened to speak, even when they might make errors (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). Games help participants build relationships through a friendly and positive atmosphere that can be created and rearranged specifically from game to game, keeping an always different and exciting learning environment (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). Games «attract students to communicate with the language with fun», and the students' active participation produces meaningful teacher-student and student-student interactions, with students being leaders of their own learning (Rivera & Solange, 2016: 15). Games in the classroom are perfect for teaching new vocabulary, grammatical rules or for revising material (Þórisdóttir, 2020). Hadfield (1990) states that «it could be said that games provide a necessary connection between the classroom and the real world» (1990, cited in Sigurðardóttir, 2010: 16). By creating a daily routine, learning is eased, and motivation is increased; for example, «starting a class by singing a song or using a fun game like Simon says, is a good way to get the students engaged» and, by acting in pairs or small groups, stress and anxiety can be decreased (Þórisdóttir, 2020: 26). Some types of games, such as role play, stories and drama, are perfect activities to use in language learning, because they allow learners to actively join in without feeling pressure or anxiety in addition to being participative and involved in a natural environment; that is why the acquisition of a language should be linked to all characteristics of the children's lives, introducing to young learners «routines, familiar situations, […] rhymes and songs» (Griva & Semoglou, 2012: 2). Since games are factor of development and maturation of the child and the main means the child assimilates reality with, it is important to present different activities in different phases of the lesson, each one belonging to a different group of games (Caon & Rutka, 2004). Gardner (1983), who theorised that all human beings have multiple intelligences, claims that the study of a certain topic in school should be approached in at least six different ways, in order to increase the chances that all students reach learning in class (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). The use of games in learning allows the realisation of learning objectives that ease comprehension and participation in the real world. The active involvement in playing helps the learners' maintenance of interest and commitment through the entire lesson (De Rossi, 2008). The operative dimension of learning, that is learning by doing, promotes a more stable and long-lasting learning, since the «doing» dimension of games also includes doing with the language (Caon & Rutka, 2004). The aim of learning a language is communicating in an authentic way in real life situations, and it can be achieved by using the language as a tool for social interaction (Caon & Rutka, 2004). Finally, it is important to use games in the classroom in order to give children the opportunity to play since, due to the rapid change of society, many of them can't play during their free time (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). The amount of traffic, especially in big cities, creates diffidence in many parents, who are reluctant to let their children play outside; besides, passive activities such as watching television, playing computer games or other digital games, are seen as more exciting than active physical playing, so that nowadays there are fewer and fewer children that play in groups outside (Sigurðardóttir, 2010).

1.2.1 Advantages and disadvantages of using games for language learning

Some of the general advantages of learning a foreign language at a very young age are the acquisition of a better pronunciation, a better language performance and the development of a more positive approach towards the foreign language and its culture (Griva & Semoglou, 2012). By taking part in games and physical activities, situations where communication is needed can be created, so that the language can be learnt more quickly and effortlessly, especially in a low-anxiety environment, and have many senses involved (Griva & Semoglou, 2012). Another major advantage of using games in language learning is that they give opportunity for practice. Teacher-centred classrooms usually do not have enough time for learners to practice their foreign language structures; games, instead, allow learners to abundantly use the language that they have learnt, participating in the communicative process during the game (Gaudart, 1999). As Gaudart (1999) states, «with practice comes progress, with progress comes motivation, and with motivation comes more learning» (Gaudart, 1999: 8).

In her work, Þórisdóttir (2020) lists some advantages and disadvantages of using games in the language classroom (Þórisdóttir, 2020: 16. Table 2). One of the advantages is that games are an appreciated break from everyday's language class routine; plus, they are stimulating and a mean to develop motivation, which helps sustaining the difficulties and struggles of learning (Þórisdóttir, 2020). Furthermore, games create a meaningful context where language can be used, allowing learners to practice the four main skills, that is, reading, writing, listening and speaking (Þórisdóttir, 2020). Among the disadvantages emerges the difficulty to keep students quiet, or at least not too noisy, as also stated by Gaudart (1999). In addition, there is the risk that students find the games boring, especially if these are famous games, and as a consequence they don't get involved as much, or that teenagers find them childish and don't want to participate (Þórisdóttir, 2020). These situations can be avoided by introducing new or less known games or by modifying more common games adding some twists or challenges to them, in order to keep learners motivated and curious about the activities presented. Concerning the noise issue, a solution can be to move from the classroom and go outside or in a room far from other classes, since it must be taken into consideration that, in order to practice a language, students must speak, so there will never be a situation of complete silence during the lesson.

Another way to use ludic activities in classroom is through music. Music is extremely important and can be used in many different ways in learning, for example to add more fun and imagination to games or «as mnemonic device, background music, learning prompt, and to build relationships» (Rivera & Solange, 2016: 17). Music enhances motivation and attention while also enabling language acquisition. It has been proved that the brain is stimulated by rhythm, so that learners focus more on what they are studying when music is involved; music is a great tool to teach spelling and pronunciation of vocabulary as well as to decrease anxiety due to any difficulties encountered when acquiring new knowledge, and popular songs can be sang in class in order to practice pronunciation in a more dynamic way (Rivera & Solange, 2016). Singing songs in language learning can be extremely beneficial for memory and fluency, as well as for motivation and emotional processes; in addition, songs can improve listening, pronunciation and speaking skills, facilitating language learning by providing a comfortable and positive environment where students are in the best mind set possible in order to learn in the most relaxing and stimulating way (Rivera & Solange, 2016).

Kirsch (2008) states that the use of songs in foreign language (FL) learning has many benefits (2008, cited in Rivera & Solange, 2016). One advantage is that learning is eased and fastened because learners are rarely tired of listening to a song over and over, and this repetition results in the acquisition of sounds, words and sentences that, as a consequence, leads to the pronunciation of sounds and words in a confident, accurate and meaningful way in contexts outside the singing songs situation.

Rivera & Solange (2016) state that the role of games and songs in the classroom brings to a successful understanding of the topic, as observed in the students' assessments they provided. In their work is demonstrated that games are extremely important for high motivation and interest as well as for working on communication in pair and in groups. The researchers conclude that the use of songs in English teaching contributes to the development of intonation and pronunciation, decreasing the fear of speaking the language through singing. By linking the songs' sentences to the context, meaningful long-term information retaining and the creation of meaningful learning can be provided.

Passiatore et al. (2019) analyse the effectiveness of singing songs in the classroom related to the speaking performance of EFL students. The purpose of their study is to verify whether songs have a positive impact on low self-efficacy and high anxiety in speaking. The findings confirm that language proficiency is positively and indirectly related to the level of anxiety during the speaking performance; when learning is carried out in an amusing, relaxing atmosphere, in a comfortable environment, the positive emotions are enhanced while the bad ones, such as anxiety, are decreased.

According to González (2010), using games in language classrooms can create a good learning environment while also providing meaningful and comprehensible inputs. Stories can help developing the learners' understanding of the spoken language and their involvement in thinking activities, resulting in the development of learning strategies such as «listening for general meaning, predicting, guessing meaning and hypothesising» (González, 2010: 3). Stories are helpful thanks to their repetitive patterns and elements, which occur recurrently and predictably, that provide children with useful language that they can use in a second moment for their own expressive purposes. In addition to that, the repetitiveness within the stories, together with the use of acting and of body language, encourages children to actively participate. When reading stories out loud, children can link the oral words and sounds to the printed word or image that represents; while reading, the teacher should emphasise this connection by pointing to the word or image. In early language learning stages, teachers should do pre-reading activities and games, such as «games, puzzles, matching activities, songs», to prepare the learner to the comprehension of the story by reinforcing vocabulary, making learners acquainted with the new language (González, 2010: 4).

1.2.2   Studies on the use of games

The use of games in education, and in particular in language learning, has been widely studied through the years. The positive impact of ludic activities has been confirmed by many studies, such as the ones presented below. Those studies (Wang et al. (2011), Griva & Semoglou (2012), Diaz & Dimitrakis (2019), Kangas (2009), Passiatore et al. (2019), Racina (2013), Rivera & Solange (2016), Campoverde Conforme (2018), Paguay (2019), González (2010)) point out that games are useful for children in order to learn English,

since games can support students' motivation and enhance their self-confidence while lowering their performance anxiety.

Games are activities that have rules, a goal and an element of fun, and are divided in two categories, linguistic and communicative; linguistic games focus on accuracy, communicative games focus on information exchange (Wang et al., 2011). Games aren't just fun to carry out in class, but they can also increase motivation and build confidence; as a result, learners are able to acquire vocabulary in a quicker and easier way by doing actions while playing games (Wang et al., 2011). According to Dewey's Learning by doing theory, when children touch something, they are able to grasp what that thing is and how it feels, and by acting with it they learn its meaning, since, when children play games, meaning is conveyed through the actions they do in order to carry out the game (Wang et al., 2011). Games offer many opportunities to do, to act and to move, and the use of the body when playing helps students learn new vocabulary and then use what has been learnt in a more efficient way.

In their study, Wang et al. (2011) investigate the effects of using games in teaching EFL to children in elementary school, focusing on games played in the classroom environment. The variables of this study are students' motivation, vocabulary acquisition and anxiety caused by peer pressure. Results show that students with higher scores are more motivated and are also able to better acquire new vocabulary through games. Concerning anxiety due to peer pressure, results show that «there is a significantly negative relationship among students' ability and their anxiety from peers» (Wang et al., 2011: 8). Many students state that their motivation, self-confidence and vocabulary acquisition are boosted when games are used in English teaching, and that they are less anxious when they are learning the language through playing. This positive feedback from students towards the use of games in learning confirms that the application of games in teaching English is a useful technique to facilitate students' language proficiency, promote students' motivation and enhance vocabulary acquisition.

Griva & Semoglou (2012) examine the development of the language skills of seven-year-old EFL children by involving them in cognitive and movement activities that are also interactive, such as «memory and word games, drawings, constructions, role-play games, […] songs, […] races, […] dance and music activities», in order to enlarge children's speaking and communicative skills together with their creativity (Griva & Semoglou, 2012: 1). Children are interested in participating in most of the activities proposed and are able to overcome performance anxiety especially when the activities are related to exploration and to the use of familiar supplies also used in class, in order to develop notions and acquire vocabulary in non-threatening situations. During the experiment it is noticed an evolution in the pronunciation of words and in the understanding of their meaning, documenting a significant growth in how language is understood, produced and used for communication. Results show an overall positive effect on young learners' development of language skills and on the improvement of motivation.

Diaz & Dimitrakis (2019) conduct a study with the purpose of stating that games and fun activities can support the development of lexical competence of pre-teens in the English language. The relationship between games and fun activities and lexical competence in English is studied. Students are first observed for eleven weeks, then they are given two surveys in order to collect the students' perspectives and opinions about using games and fun activities in the English class. A pre-test and a post-test are carried

out to better analyse the students' problems as well as the improvement obtained. Results show that there is a higher degree of performance after the end of the experiment, with significant differences highlighting the growth in learning, proving that playful activities are one of the most efficient techniques for acquiring English vocabulary.

Kangas (2009) conducts a study that aims at investigating the playful learning environment in elementary school settings, observing in what way children experience the learning process through game designing, co-creation of knowledge and outdoor playing. Results show that children feel more satisfied when practicing in groups, feeling their learning more rewarding. According to the results of this study, a way to promote creativity, imagination, cooperation and «academic achievement» is to make the learning environment playful.

Passiatore et al. (2019) study the connection between self-efficacy and anxiety in learning a language, and how effective is singing songs in improving learners' speaking performance. It is tested the influence that singing songs in English classes has in the relationship between self-efficacy, anxiety and performance in 132 high school students aged 16 to 19. Data collection is carried out through a production task in which «vocabulary extension, number of words and speech fluency» are taken into consideration in order to have knowledge of the students' linguistic competence (Passiatore et al., 2019: 6). Results show that self-efficacy and speaking performance are significantly correlated and that, when songs are sung in class, students with low self-efficacy can benefit from it to manage anxiety, thus supporting the idea that singing songs in language learning is a positive and proficient tool to help reduce anxiety and improve students' self-efficacy.

Racina (2013) conducts a study about whether using games in teaching increases students' involvement in class and facilitates learning in young adults. The study is carried out in a class of middle schoolers who find it difficult to be actively involved in class. Data are collected by analysing students' productions as well as through a questionnaire about the overall experience. Results show that students are enriched by the use of games in learning since, while playing, students are able to effectively practice communication, active listening and working in groups. Results also show that games lead to an improvement in the learning as well as in the social, interpersonal aspect of playing.

Rivera & Solange (2016) explore the use of games in learning English in two 7th grade classes. Data about students' opinions on the use of games and singing songs in class are collected by using questionnaires, and teachers are interviewed about the use of games and songs in class and their benefits. Through observation it is found that with games the levels of motivation, participation and performance are high. Results show that games are a useful tool to enhance learners' motivation and interest due to, among other factors, their active participation in the learning process. Results also show a strong cooperative element, that is playing in order to win, demonstrating the presence of an emotional component in learning, which is extremely important for the growth of the social and cognitive aspects of students. Finally, results state that the use of songs helps enhancing pronunciation and intonation while decreasing stress, anxiety and fear of speaking in front of the class, together with allowing a long-lasting retention of information and the creation of meaningful learning.

Campoverde Conforme (2018) conduct a study to discover the status of implementation of educational games in EFL teaching by «examining the methodologies and strategies» met when executing these games, including musical games (Campoverde Conforme, 2018: 6). The answers to the survey show that students are willing to learn in a dynamic and entertaining way, knowing that learning a language must be a funny experience. Students also affirm that they have a strong desire to learn new words every lesson, especially by playing games, since games are motivating and are able to enhance interest towards learning the language. Overall, results show that using playful, ludic activities such as «games, illustrations, audios, interactive exercises» would facilitate the processes of EFL teaching and learning while also increasing confidence in both teacher and students (Campoverde Conforme, 2018: 77).

Paguay (2019) investigates about vocabulary acquisition, and on how it can be strengthened through ludic activities, by designing a learning. The aim is to find an effective way to make English class more entertaining and dynamic and doing so by using activities that would enhance students' participation and interaction by working in groups. Results of the survey show students agreement on the importance of learning vocabulary in order to better understand and learn the language, adding that learning new vocabulary every day would improve their proficiency in English in a more efficient way. Overall, students want to be motivated and engaged in learning through different types of activities, ludic activities and games being one of them.

González (2010) conducts a research study on the use of stories to teach English as a foreign language to children in elementary school. The objective is to create a new design, using new language teaching methodologies, in order to turn language learning into something fun and meaningful for children. Data are collected through direct observation, a survey and a diagnostic test, in order to establish students' prior knowledge of the FL. Results show that children are motivated by the use of stories, also demonstrating that they are able to understand the story as well as to acquire new language. Knowing students' preferences and interests is considered extremely helpful during the creation of a new, fun and meaningful design; students find learning interesting and enjoyable because their passions and interests are considered during the creation process. A great diversity of games and activities makes the lesson engaging and fun for students, motivating them to actively participate. Stories and, more in general, ludic activities make the process of learning the language useful, appealing and meaningful for them, and games help creating a relaxed and stress-free space where children can feel confident and safe while learning. According to the researchers, it has been necessary to carry out post-listening/reading tasks and language-related activities in order to make the stories more understandable while helping children to shift «from the receptive competence needed for listening and reading to the productive competence necessary for speaking and writing» (González, 2010: 11).

1.2.3   The role of teachers

It is a common thought that games can offer strong and meaningful language practice, and this is why they should be considered one of the main ways through which teachers can teach a foreign language, and not simply a pastime. There are innumerable types of games to choose from, such as «action, adventure, puzzle, racing, role play, simulation, sports, and strategy», and some have a bigger educational importance than others, so it is

important that the teacher makes sure that students know the reason why they are playing that specific game (Þórisdóttir, 2020: 17). By using games, data from real life are assumed, re-elaborated, and organised in a dynamic continuum that includes motivated students who are also protagonists of their own educational path (Caon & Rutka, 2004).

It is also important to acknowledge that not all games fit all classroom environments, or all students, because, although one game might be perfect for one teacher or for a particular group of students, it can be horrible for another teacher or group (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). It is good to keep in mind when selecting a game that a recipe for a good educational game is one that balances both fun and challenge (1998, cited in Sigurðardóttir, 2010). Teachers shouldn't choose a game that is too complicated for students, because the consequence can be a decrease in interest amongst students; teachers also need to make sure to explain in depth the rules of the game and to ensure that all instructions have been understood before starting the game (Sigurðardóttir, 2010). Teachers must be careful in using this approach and techniques, because it is important that they keep in mind the students' needs and ages, because the perception of games and their acceptability is different whether a person is 6, 16 or 30, and they must also consider the students' personal characteristics and adapt the activities considering both the context they are in and the didactic objectives to pursue (Caon & Rutka, 2004).

Teachers that use a game-based approach consider ludic activities the founding principle to promote the global development of the student; their aim is to create a calm and relaxing place where students are the heart of the learning process, leveraging on their motivation, on the pleasure of the challenge and on the value of cooperation in order to achieve a goal (Caon & Rutka, 2004). «Teachers should organise activities where students become the active player of their own learning path, promoting their success in being autonomous in studying» (Caon & Rutka, 2004: 19). Challenging, non-anxiogenics activities, such as research in groups or problem-solving activities are useful to reach the goal, along with other activities that promote cooperative techniques (Caon & Rutka, 2004). McCombs & Pope (1996) state that:

> «Human beings are naturally motivated to learn when they aren't stressed about a failure, when they perceive what they are learning as significative and important personally, and when they have a relationship based on teachers' respect and support. [...] Students are motivated to learn when teachers offer them the possibility to take autonomous decisions and to exercise some control on their own learning process» (1996: 17-18, cited in Caon & Rutka, 2004: 20).

Teachers must communicate clearly the educational intent behind the use of games in the lesson, which is to make students aware of the knowledge they have acquired when learning with and from others, because it is important to reflect on the processes and the contents of language learning, that is, how and what has been learned (Caon & Rutka, 2004). As Polito (2000) states:

> «Giving value to the ludic dimension in learning prevents the risk of orienting school only on the cognitive level, to the expense of the other educational dimensions, such as affective, interpersonal, physical, manual. The teacher who introduces a ludic dimension in class, facilitates at the same time learning and socialising and, through playing, can bring out the educational potential of the class group» (2000: 333, cited in Caon & Rutka, 2004: 29-30).

It is important to give the students different stimuli, to let them use different ways of perception, creating occasions for students to be involved in different experiences, both cognitively and psycho-physically (Caon & Rutka, 2004). Children use games as a

privileged way to connect with the real world, to create social relationships, to explore, to discover and to interiorise data from reality, turning them into more complex conceptual nets (Caon & Rutka, 2004).

Chapter 2: THE RESEARCH

In chapter 2 we will present the study carried out on the use of ludic activities and games in learning English as a foreign language, especially with children.

The study aims at investigating how much the ludic methodology is integrated in EFL learning, specifically in the case study presented, and whether ludic activities used in in-person learning can be easily applied to an online learning setting as well. The chapter will present the research questions (paragraph 2.1), the context of the study (paragraph 2.2), the participant (paragraph 2.3), the instrument used for data collection (paragraph 2.4), the analysis of the data (paragraph 2.5) and the results (paragraph 2.6).

2.1 The research questions

The research questions were:

- RQ1: To what extent are games and ludic activities integrated in the teaching English as Foreign Language project dedicated to Italian children?
- RQ2: Are ludic activities and games easy to use also in an online learning setting?

2.2 Context

The research was carried out both at the premises of the teacher's English school and in public kindergartens and primary schools in Imola, Italy. The project is called «L'inglese un gioco da… bimbi» and consists in teaching English as a foreign language through games, songs, music, storytelling, manual workshops. Lessons are 45 minutes long for kindergarteners and one hour long for primary and middle schoolers. During school hours, the lesson is carried out in the school gym or in a spare class, where desks can be moved in order to have space to move, or outside in the schoolyard. Concerning outside school lessons, they are carried out in the playground or in the English school, where a big room is dedicated to playing.

2.3 Participant

The interviewee is an English teacher at a private English school based in a city in northern Italy, Imola, who also works in kindergartens, primary and middle schools. She graduated at the University of interpreters and translators and worked in multinational companies before starting her career as English teacher. In 2004, she started teaching English in education centres and in after-school programs. She followed formation courses such as «How to teach children English», L'albero di Momo, by Elisabetta Mohwinckel, and ACLE, a course about increasing motivation through drama. In addition, she did, and still does, formative training and research via blogs of educators, mother tongue teachers and teachers of English as a foreign language. In 2009 she founded her private school and started teaching English with her trademark «L'inglese un gioco da… bimbi®». Her lessons are centred around ludic activities, especially games.

Her teaching methods are mainly TPR, music as free expression of the self and as stimulus to linguistic production, games as a means to have fun, craftsmanship as a medium to convey language in an authentic way. In 2018, she founded E.H.L.P. srl – English, Homework & Learning Projects, a company that incorporates the previous project with the addition of an after-school program.

2.4 Instruments for data collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview to the participant teacher and through a collection of the materials used during the project.

2.4.1 The interview

The interview was conducted via Zoom, screen recorded and then transcribed manually. The first questions were more general ones, to introduce the project, then there were more specific questions about the lesson, the activities and games, some differences between in presence and online English teaching. In particular:

Q 1	How would you describe the founding principles of your work, of the approach you use in your project?
Q 2	Why are games and TPR (Total Physical Response) activities so important in your classes?
Q 3	How did a typical lesson work? How was it structured?
Q 4	What were the most frequent activities in your lessons? Did they prefer certain activities more than others? How did you choose the activities?
Q 5	Did you prefer doing activities that you know the children liked, even though you didn't, or proposing activities that you liked but the children didn't?
Q 6	What are the learning, linguistic and educational objectives that you set? Which activities lead you to the achievement of these goals?
Q 7	What have been the major changes because of this pandemic and lockdown in: methodologies, kind of activities proposed, ways in which those activities are carried out?
Q 7b	When and in what way is the lesson plan created? What about during the lockdown, in remote learning? How did lesson planning work?
Q 8	What has been the children's response to those changes that needed to be done (also in terms of motivation, attention, enjoyment of the activities, etc.)?

2.4.2 The teaching materials and lesson observation

The materials used during educational games and other activities in this project were collected. Interesting data come also from the researcher's direct observation of the teaching activities.

2.5 Analysis

The data were analysed in a qualitative way. As the answers consisted in personal opinions and thoughts on the work the teacher had done over the years, including changing and adjustments due to the to the pandemic, the following steps have been followed. First, answers were transcribed. Second, answers were summarised in order to highlight more important data over other information. Third, the key points of each answer were pinpointed, starting from significant data found in previous studies read and looking for similar pieces of information in the teacher's answers. Questions used to collect data to answer RQ1 were Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6 and Q7, since they help to understand to what extent games are ludic activities are integrated in the EFL learning project studied, that is, how many of those types of activities are found in the project. Concerning RQ2, questions used to answer it were Q7, Q7b and Q8 in order to understand whether ludic activities and games are easy to use also in an online learning environment. Fourth, those key points were compared with findings of previous studies to see whether they were similar or not. As far as teaching materials are concerned, they were analysed in relation to the level of improvement they offered to language learning

2.6 Results

What follows is a summary highlighting the main aspects arising from the teacher's answers (paragraph 2.6.1-2.6.9) and from the analysis of the teaching materials collected and direct observation of the activities (paragraph 2.6.10).

2.6.1 Teaching principles

When asked how she would describe the founding principles of her work, of the approach she used in her project of EFL (Question 1), the teacher answered that she didn't follow pre-defined teaching units, like in textbooks, although her lessons were structured. She also added that the lessons were carried out in English full immersion, preferring activities such as handcrafting, playing, body movement games. Everything was thought and tailored differently and in a specific way in order to suit each group age. The choice of some activities over others derived from the need to encounter the children's passions and interests, their desire to move, play, of healthy competition, of handcrafting, alongside their knowledge and cognitive abilities and capacities.

2.6.2 Why games and TPR activities

When asked why games and TPR activities were so important for her to use in her classes (Question 2), the teacher answered that TPR was extremely important and useful in teaching a language, especially to young children, because they were able to learn the language by using their bodies, by doing simple actions, without the need to speak. This way, intrinsic learning was enhanced since children, by listening to what the teacher said and watching her actions, were able to associate words they heard with objects they saw or used, or actions they did, and internalised what they have learnt, acquiring new vocabulary.

2.6.3 Typical structure of a lesson

When asked how a typical lesson was structured (Question 3), the teacher answered that the lesson was divided in few sections. The first part was the welcoming, where children had a conversation with the teacher and peers about any topic. The teacher spoke in English, while the children were free to speak in Italian or in English. During this conversation, body language was predominant. Then, still in English, the teacher introduced a song as the first activity. It was usually the same song for few lessons because this gave children confidence and made them feel capable of speaking the language, enhancing self-esteem and self-motivation. Actual props, such as puppets, were used to justify the fact that the teacher, despite being Italian, only spoke in English. The teacher added that she never told children that she spoke Italian, but they were able to find it out at some point. Those props were also useful to lead children from an activity to another without interrupting the flow of the lesson and avoiding the children's distraction. The teacher then introduced some games, both of movement and stiller ones, in order to have them burn off their energies while playing so that during the storytelling they would focus more on listening and distract less. Some games were also aimed to the intuitive comprehension of the story while others were thought to bring out the language, the words and the sentences that the children would encounter in the story read later on during the lesson. The stories were illustrated, and good stories aimed at lower or higher age groups could be adjusted to the specific group age taken into consideration. Stories were mainly interactive, so children had to pay attention to the story, understand what it was asking them to do and then do it. In telling a story, verbal and non-verbal, body language were tied together in an authentic animated reading. The lesson ended with another song, which was a way to make them relax and chill out a moment. Once again, the song was the same for few lessons so that children would feel confident enough to try and sing along. This structure of the lesson was the same for most of the lessons, since routine was good and comforting for children in order to get them acquainted with the language and the activities proposed, as well as in order to let them become confident enough to be active participants, not only physically but also verbally, in the activities. It was important to remember that, even though children needed a routine to build confidence and motivation, they also got bored quickly of doing the same things over and over again, so they always needed new inputs to enhance their interest and motivation during the lesson.

2.6.4 Most frequent activities and games

When asked what the most frequent activities in her lessons are and how she chose what activities to provide (Question 4), the teacher answered that there were some frequent games that she often presented in her lessons. Many of these games focused on body movement, on facial expressions, on role playing. The teacher observed that children didn't like competitive games, even if it was a healthy competition, so she had to modify games to be done in pairs or groups. When children played in groups or all together, the affective filter wasn't activated in shy or less linguistic proficient children, since the attention wasn't fully on them. She also observed that children didn't like the «maximum peak of energy», but they needed the energy to be the proper amount and be followed by a slow down moment. This need that children had would require an

incredible individual observational ability from the teacher, who had to understand when to switch from a more energetic activity to a calmer one. The teacher then started listing some games, for example «Red light, Green light»[2], a game that she enriched by making it animal themed. By doing so, children were introduced not only to the animals' names, but also to their actions. The teacher stated that it was important to transmit the richness of the language to learners, and doing so through facial and body expressions, connected to the verbal language, carried out the effectiveness of TPR activities, underlying the importance of body language, in particular role playing. Music was widely used in games, especially «Music stop & go» games.[3] Thanks to music, children were free to express themselves by moving to the rhythm, dancing, singing and, in order to do so, they had to pay attention to the music, which mustn't be taken for granted by teachers. It was important to start the game only when children were fully concentrated and were really listening. «Music stop & go» games could be done in many different versions, for example moving in a silly way, like monsters or animals. Concentration games and games that can have levels, meaning that different goals or difficulties can be added throughout the game, were good for maintaining interest and motivation high throughout the whole activity. A concentration game the teacher mentioned was «Guess which one is missing»[4]. According to the teacher, children would play this game endlessly. When playing, children were focused on figuring out which objects were missing, and they were also connected with their listening. The «Game of the forest»[5] was another game the teacher mentioned. She said that through this game she was able to grab their attention and draw it towards herself and on the game, while also guiding the game. The teacher was the tree while the children were little animals. She added that she would choose the same animal for everyone so that there weren't too many different inputs at the same time. Children had to act like the animals, so if for example they were rabbits they had to jump, not run. Since this game had a lot of rules, children had to be extremely concentrated and focused on the game, and they had to listen very carefully to the teacher explaining the rules, in English, otherwise they wouldn't understand the game and wouldn't be able to play. Classic games could become more interesting with a little twist in it. For example, the game «Simon says»[6] could be done adding new levels of difficulty, starting from copying the actions the teacher did to having to listen to what the teacher said when she wasn't moving. An adjustment the teacher made has been replacing Simon with a real puppet and even changing its name. She said that the reason she decided to do so was in order to make the experience more real, since children didn't know who Simon was, but if there was a puppet called Oscar, children know who Oscar was, since they saw

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[2] To play this game, the teacher is on one side of the room giving his back while children are on the opposite side, in a line. The teacher is the traffic light; when she says Green Light, children can move towards the teacher until she turns around saying Red Light. As soon as they hear Red Light they must freeze, and they can't move until they hear Green Light again. If children move when it is given the Red Light command, they are eliminated. The winner is the first person to reach the teacher on the other side of the room.

[3] Music stop & go games are games where children can move, randomly or in a specific way, while the music is on, but as soon as the music stops they must stop in whatever position they are and stay still until music starts again.

[4] Guess which one is missing is a guessing game where players are presented with few different objects on a table. After few minutes, objects are covered with a blanket and one or two of them are taken away. Once the objects are uncovered, participants have to guess which objects have been taken away.

[5] In the game of the forest, the teacher is a tree and children are little animals. The teacher tries to touch children without moving from the spot, reaching out with hands and arms to touch them. When a child is caught, he/she becomes a tree too and helps the teacher to catch the little animals, until there is only one child remaining who is the winner.

[6] Simon says is a game where a person says an action preceded by the phrase: Simon says, and players have to do the action. However, if the person says an action without saying: Simon says first and someone does the action anyways, this person is eliminated.

it, they could touch it, and they could also interact with it. There were also games that might not work for certain groups. The teacher pointed out that the game «Witch commands colour»[7] didn't work with kindergarteners, even though they liked it in Italian. The reason why was that they could sense the educational goal of this game and they got bored soon of playing it. The secret was to trick them by adding something, such as reaching the colour in a funny way, in order to have them engaged in the game. This game allowed children to concentrate, since in order to play they had to listen, hence they had to be focused on what was happening and what the teacher was saying. If they weren't physically and mentally present, it could be difficult to carry out a slightly more complicated game, with few additional rules.

2.6.5   The choice of activities

When asked whether she preferred presenting activities that she liked or activities she knew children liked but she disliked (Question 5), the teacher answered that, at the very beginning, she presented activities that she liked and, more in general, different activities, since she had to experiment and test the activities to understand which were the ones that were more suitable for that lesson and with those children. So, initially, there was no continuity of activities, no routine, no well-defined structure of the lesson and of the activities presented. Then, the teacher added that choosing games and activities that children liked was easier in order to have learners more involved and motivated in carrying out the activity. In addition, the teacher was able to be less worried about choosing the right activities that could enhance children's motivation and active participation. By looking at children's reactions and emotions, she got to know them. It was important to have a moment of free conversation during slow down activities, since they could express themselves and their thoughts freely, both verbally and by using body language.

2.6.6   The objectives

When asked what the learning, linguistic and educational objectives that she set were (Question 6), the teacher answered that the objectives had to be less educational and more horizontal[8], and that she set them differently based on the group ages and on the children's interests and passions, although the common thread had to be the authentic use of language. She also added that the easiest way to achieve this goal of an authentic use of language was by using stories, because books allowed children to develop their fantasy, their creativity and their imagination, in addition to stories being funny and interesting for them. Storytelling was a means through which the authenticity of the language could be provided, with its expressions of spoken language, emotions, and it was also the means through which curiosity towards what was unknown, what wasn't

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[7] Witch commands colour is a game where there is a person who plays the witch and other participants who are the colours. Each participant chooses a colour without telling it to anyone, and the Witch says: Witch commands colour… X. Whoever chose that colour has to run away and try not to get touched by the witch, otherwise the player is eliminated.

[8] Horizontal learning is about the development of communication and active listening skills, focusing on the functional development of knowledge, skills (such as teamwork and critical thinking) and behaviours with the objective of strengthening the learners' key competences. www.diamondmc.com

Educational objectives clearly describe what learners will know and will be able to do after attending an educational program or activity. www.contextualscience.org

familiar, that was the cultural aspect of the language, could be stimulated in a creative way. Another important aspect highlighted was the importance of using different learning methods during the lesson, and in different lessons, so that children could acquire knowledge by reading, listening or even speaking, by moving their bodies, by handcrafting, by singing or dancing, by exploring the world around them. In doing that, every person had the chance to learn in the way that suited them best and, when using games, children also had great fun.

2.6.7 Major changes due to the pandemic

When asked what the major changes due to the pandemic regarding methodology, types of activities proposed, ways of carrying out those activities were (Question 7), the teacher answered that the first change between how lessons were structured before and how they were during lockdown is that the initial part of free conversation was carried out entirely in Italian, to help them not to be overwhelmed by the verbal use of the foreign language because of the lack of the body movement part due to being behind a screen. Music was still an essential part of the lessons, and during this period of online lessons youtube videos were used to accompany sounds with images. It is important to highlight that, for the first time, the material was shared. Children could autonomously go and watch videos or listen to music they enjoyed the most during the lesson even when the lesson was over, whereas before the materials belonged to the teacher only and wasn't available outside of class. With children having free and unlimited access to the material, unconscious learning could take place since, if they liked a song or a video, they could play and replay it how many times they wanted and eventually it would stick in their heads, whether it was words, sentences or sounds. In storytelling the teacher used youtube videos, since there were plenty of videos that showed a book whose pages were turned, also to make it easier for the teacher to read the story from the actual book and for children to follow the story and see the images on it better. At times, the teacher created her own videos where, together with images from the book, she introduced puppets or objects by making them pop out into the frame, almost in a theatrical way. This added a fun surprise effect which intrigued children and engaged them more into listening to the story, since they were curious about what was going to pop up next and when. It was funny, especially for children from 5 to 7 years old, because it was a surprise, it made them laugh, it was like a cartoon animation but performed live. Although being remote classes, body movement activities were still carried out. In fact, as the teacher stated, they were fundamental. Her only request was to find a space big enough and free from tables, chairs or anything else that could be in the way, in order to allow them to move freely. The teacher added that it was important for her to be able to carry out music and exploration games, such as treasure hunts, even remotely because it was a way to let children move after hours of school where they had to sit still in front of a screen. Moments like the manual workshop or having a snack were opportunities to bond and have a conversation about anything brought up by children, so that the socialisation that would usually happen at school somehow happened through the screen. The teacher dealt with an educational aspect, that was, performance anxiety children sometimes might have. Being distant could have made it grow exponentially, and that was why her purpose during online activities was promoting the relationship, taking a moment to be together, appreciating whatever might come out, regardless of workshops, and other activities, being more or less guided. The teacher then explained how it was to come back doing in

presence lessons. She said that some adjustments to the lesson were made. The first change was the location, that was, lessons were carried out mostly outside in the playground, following the outdoor education approach (used along with the humanistic-affective approach). This newly introduced approach opened up to the possibility of doing experience-based activities, and using the language while doing was absolutely natural. The language spoken by the teacher during the lessons had slowly and naturally shifted back from Italian to English and the lessons weren't as much planned now as they were before. The teacher explained that the initial and final greetings parts of the lesson were less structured, since there wasn't an established routine anymore due to many other changes occurred in a short period of time. A greeting song that she used a lot back in presence has been a name song, which was useful for the teacher to learn children's names and for children themselves to learn their peers' names. She would ask to the whole class the name of this or that child, instead of asking directly to him. In doing so, the attention shifted from the single person to the group, creating cooperation between them and avoiding the activation of the affective filter. Furthermore, to every name was associated an action, and children loved picking what actions to do the next time. The teacher highlighted that the input of the name song was authentic, since she only spoke in English, and she really needed to know the children's names after she introduced herself. However, after few lessons, the song lost its efficacy, since everybody would eventually learn the names. This is when this song was replaced by other activities, for example a body warm up, or the lesson would start directly with a game. The games and activities presented were mainly ones that promote cooperation among learners; the input of the songs was authentic, and the language was used for authentic purposes, such as communicating with peers while playing. An important change was about music broadcasting, since music devices weren't used anymore by the teacher. Music was now played and sung live, because the teacher felt the need to detoxify from the amount of time children, and the teacher herself, spent in front of a screen (due to school hours or because children couldn't go play outside for a long period). Playing live music resulted in an enhancement of children's language production, since they were found to be more active in singing along when the music was live rather than when it was recorded (especially kindergarteners). Realising the importance of doing experience through games and not just playing the game per se, especially games of exploration and games that allow movement and use of the body, was extremely important for the teacher. Being outside allowed children to move more freely compared to when being in a class or another closed space. Furthermore, they had the possibility to touch with their hands everything that surrounded them and to use their five senses. The manual workshop became a way to carry on a theme while also being a stimulus for creativity and for using the sense of touch, as well as an opportunity to explore the environment, to play pretend using rocks, leaves, sticks etc., both in a free and in a guided way. Since the meetings were mostly outdoor, there was space for endless possibilities for children to work with their hands, for example digging to find worms or small rocks or creating a path where imaginary cars represented by natural materials (leaves, rocks, etc.) can race. Also, children were encouraged to play with the objects they created during the workshop and to use their imagination to transform that object into something else, guided by their fantasy and creativity. Finally, the ending part of the lesson was a pure moment of fun with dancing and music, using the rhythm to make children move their bodies and guide their attention on the little real, concrete bits and pieces of communication that was happening in that moment («Bye bye!», «It's time to go!», «See you next time!»).

2.6.8 Lesson plans

When asked how and when she creates lessons plans now and how she created them during the pandemic (Question 7b), the teacher answered that, during the pandemic, she did brand new lesson plans, since teaching was carried out online; she started from a resource, that could be a video, a song, etc., and then linked games to it. It was important that the material was entertaining and highly motivating for the children, so that it could stimulate observations and thoughts from them. Concerning lesson planning back in presence, the teacher answered that she decided the activities to do each lesson, starting from children's requests or desires. That was why the planning was mostly done when the lesson was over, by putting together and in order the activities and games presented. She added that the lessons weren't as guided as before; sometimes children were free to play games and to propose them to the teacher and she might join them in playing those games, while other times children would explicitly ask the teacher what games she prepared for the lesson.

2.6.9 Children's feedback about changes

When asked what the children's response to those changes was (online lessons, indoor, different activities, and so on) (Question 8), the teacher answered that the children were the ones who brought back the idea of a routine, asking her to have a day dedicated to their favourite game, scavage hunting. During the period of online lessons, the teacher created interactive Powerpoint presentations consisting of, for example, images and some board games-like activities where the computer screen was the board. The children's reaction to this type of meetings was of surprise and motivation, since they witnessed a huge difference between online meetings and school lessons, and expressed their desire to participate every time, giving positive feedback. Concerning kindergarteners, the teacher didn't carry out online lessons during lockdown, since she already struggled in adjusting and modifying materials for the older group ages. After the online learning period, the teacher found it hard to adapt lessons to be carried out back in presence, since many changes occurred in shifting from lessons in presence to online learning. The lessons back in presence were carried out outside and in English, there were less but more explorative activities and games, the props were less but they were more functional to the games presented. A new presence in the lessons was the guitar, since music continued to be played and sung live. Children were led to sing out loud and to listen to their voices producing different sounds. This resulted in them randomly singing pieces of songs in class, which was a spontaneous and natural linguistic production that, according to the teacher, has been missing for quite some time in her projects. Children were more concentrated and focused, and every moment of the lesson became a moment of fun, even the moment of transition from an activity to another (when has always been difficult to keep them concentrated).

2.6.10 Teaching materials and activity observation

Many different props were introduced during the lesson. Some of them were a steady presence in a certain activity or game, others were used to enhance motivation and interest towards an activity, to add a twist to a game in order to make it more captivating or to help children enhance an active language production.

The material collected consisted of children's books, puppets, a suitcase (usually containing other props), costumes and objects used to play pretend, some artworks from different manual workshops, speakers and a guitar.

Books were, obviously, the central part of the storytelling activity. The whole activity started from the choice of a story, and then some props (puppets, costumes etc.) were added to storytelling to ease comprehension, to add curiosity while also keeping children concentrated or to make it funnier, for example by doing different voices depending on which character was speaking (Image 1).[9]

Concerning puppets, besides being used in storytelling, they were used also in different games, such as music games (Simon says) or chasing games (such as Witch commands colour or different variations of this game). Puppets were also used by the teacher as a sidekick when introducing an activity, giving the teacher an excuse to speak in English. Children were invited to interact with the puppet, but only by speaking in English, allowing them to practise actively the language without feeling the pressure or the anxiety to speak. Those puppets were usually carried inside an old suitcase (or a big bag) and were pulled out when needed. It was fun to play pick-a-boo with them, making them partially sneak out from the suitcase and then hide again inside it, until children guessed what puppet it was. The suitcase could also contain the book for storytelling and other props, connected with the theme of the lesson or to the story (Image 2). The suitcase gave a sense of adventure and of travelling that was widely used with children as a theme, so that they could explore the environment they were in, both in class and outside, in the playground.

Costumes to dress up and objects to play pretend (such as a doctor set, foods and drinks, a supermarket cashbox) were used to promote an authentic use of the language, also practicing everyday life's situations that they might experience directly or through their parents (grocery shopping, going to the doctor etc.) (Image 3). When playing pretend, children didn't feel anxious or stressed to produce language, since they were producing language with the objective of carrying out the game, exchanging meanings and information with other players. Sometimes, when the teacher wanted to introduce a specific topic with specific vocabulary, she prepared the lesson by arranging the environment according to that topic, adding images, photos, writings of some of the vocabulary, and sometimes she would also put on a costume and pretend to be a character throughout the whole lesson (Image 4). Children found it very funny, since it was a full immersion situation where they weren't in the class anymore, but they found themselves in the jungle, in the old wild west or in a crazy chef's kitchen.

The manual workshop was a means to allow children to use their fantasy and creativity, and they could be helped by some materials and objects they had at their disposal. The more varied the materials proposed were, the more children's creativity was boosted. Along with common materials, less common materials were used (for example, vegetables used as paint brushes) (Images 5-6). Creativity was also helpful when making objects that were later used in other games or activities (Images 7-8). In doing so, children had a motivating reason to carry out the workshop, since they didn't want to be the only ones without that prop during the game. In the manual workshop, the instructions were given in English, so children had to be extremely concentrated in listening to the teacher and focused in order to be able to successfully get the work done.

Music was a fundamental tool that could be used in many activities and games. It was broadcasted via technological devices such as mp3 player, cd player or smartphone.

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[9] All images can be found in Appendix C.

Music playlists incorporating children songs, nursery rhymes or music to dance to could also be found, for example, on youtube and Spotify. Those music apps were fundamental to carry out music games and activities during lockdown, since it was easy to play songs or videos via computer. Another tool to play music with was the guitar, that was introduced right after the online learning period. Playing live music encouraged careful listening, since children were fascinated by the sound coming out of the instrument, but mostly encouraged children to sing, enhancing situations of active language production that led to learning (Image 9).

Chapter 3: DISCUSSION

In Chapter 3 we will discuss the main results of the study, starting from the research questions posed at the beginning of our research (see paragraph 2.1). Hence, the chapter will first answer to RQ1 about the level of integration of games and ludic activities in the EFL project «L'inglese un gioco da…bimbi®» (paragraph 3.1) and then will answer RQ2 about whether games and ludic activities are easy to use when carrying out online learning, as well as some differences and changes between their use in online or in presence learning (paragraph 3.2). An additional section about data that are worth noticing will be presented (paragraph 3.3). The most used props and materials (paragraph 2.6.10) and their contribution towards the language learning experience will be included in the RQ1 and RQ2 answers.

3.1 To what extent are games and ludic activities integrated in the teaching English as Foreign Language project dedicated to Italian children?

Results show that games and ludic activities are a central part of this EFL teaching project, since most of the activities have playful characteristics; music, songs, interactive storytelling and role play games are present in almost every lesson (Questions 2-3). These activities help learners to learn English through actions, which is an easier way to learn, comparable to how children learn their L1 (Caon & Rutka, 2004). The teacher underlines the importance of using a variety of activities and games so that children can use different learning methods and different intelligences to acquire authentic language (Questions 1-6), agreeing with Gardner's multiple intelligence theory that states that every person has a unique set of intelligences that allow them to learn the language, or any other subject, differently. Activities and games in the project studied are found to be varied in types and in skills required to carry them out. Presenting different variations of games, as well as adding levels of difficulty or goals, is a perfect way in order to maintain interest and motivation high. Concerning previous studies, Begotti (2007) and Caon & Rutka (2004) underline the importance of using a variety of games and ludic activities in different phases of the lessons to support learners in using different learning styles and intelligences in order to learn in the most natural way as possible for them, while Paguay (2019) and González (2010) find that children are more motivated to play and to actively participate when learning takes place through different types of games and activities. Campoverde Conforme (2018) states that students are more prone to learning when it is done in a dynamic and entertaining way, since they want language learning to be a funny experience. This is one of the main reasons why the project studied provides mainly games and playful activities. Classic well-known games, such as «Simon says», can

become more interesting when adding a twist to the original version of game. In doing so, children don't get bored of playing always the same game, since it isn't the same exact game but a variation of it. However, it can happen that, at times, children don't enjoy playing a specific game; by modifying the game and adding a twist the teacher is able to have them engaged and interested in that game (Question 4). Concerning materials used in playing games, puppets are used as an expedient in order to use the language authentically. For instance, the teacher talks to children through this puppet, and children talk directly to it, but they can only speak in the target language. A puppet can be used in the game Simon says, where the puppet is Simon and it calls the actions, or in the game Witch commands colour (or variations of it), where a puppet can be used to play the bad character instead of the teacher act as the witch. Puppets are also used to enhance storytelling, especially in an online learning situation, in order to have children more curious and intrigued by the sudden appearance of these props, focusing their attention on listening to the story.

TPR (Total Physical Response) and body movement activities, together with music games, are widely used in the project studied, as the teacher prefers to introduce non-verbal activities to support shy students in learning the language without anxiety, making it an enjoyable experience (Questions 2-4). When playing, children don't necessarily use the verbal language, but they use the body language to communicate. Data state the importance of using TPR especially with young children who, even if they can't produce language yet, are able to learn sounds, words and simple sentences by listening to the teacher, watching her doing actions and copying those actions (Question 2). Since there is no need to use verbal language, TPR activities and games are useful to decrease anxiety when communicating, especially in early stages of learning, and to avoid the activation of the affective filter that would make any effort to learn useless. Studies such as Diaz & Dimitrakis (2019) and Caon & Rutka (2004) mention the TPR method and its use in language learning, agreeing on its importance in the learning process. In addition, Wang et al. (2011) state that students' anxiety is decreased when they are learning the language through games, and that learners' motivation and self-confidence can be successfully increased when using games in EFL learning. According to Griva & Semoglou (2012), body movement activities, role plays, dances and songs can increase the learners' speaking and communicative skills and their creativity. These types of activities are widely present in the project studied and are used especially in situation where speaking needs to be encouraged, while the use of creativity can be found in activities such as the manual workshop. Concerning the enhancement of active speaking, role playing activities are ideal to recreate many different situations where language is used. The materials employed are costumes and objects that are used to play pretend, such as plastic or wooden fruit and veggies, a doctor kit, a kitchen set. The teacher sometimes dresses up and pretends to be a traveller, a seller, etc, and children pretend to be at the grocery store, at the bank, and use the language to carry out the game. Children themselves can also pretend to be sellers, explorers, bankers, and carry out the game without the teacher being involved in it. Role playing is useful to practice the language of everyday situations while having fun and lowering stress and performance anxiety. Through role playing, children's imagination is stimulated, since they pretend to be somewhere else and act as if they were someone else. Concerning creativity, the creation of objects, drawings, paintings or posters using their hands is a great way to make something, to build it together, whether it is related to a book, to a specific theme, to a certain time of the year (such as festivities), or not. The instructions are given in English, so children must be concentrated in order to

understand them and to be able to follow along and not fall behind. Sometimes, objects are created to be taken home and kept; other times, those objects are later used as part of a game. Magic bracelets, hats, masks etc. are just few examples of the objects created during the manual workshop and later used when playing. The fact that those objects are used within an activity stimulates children to make beautiful objects, resulting in children listening more carefully to the teacher's instruction in order to successfully carry out the task. During online learning, the manual workshop is carried out via internet. The teacher communicates in advance the necessary materials for that workshop, so that the children's parents can buy the required material to carry out the activity. In the project studied it is underlined the fundamental importance of the person's affective and personality features and to their cognitive aspects since, as Lombardo (2006) states, all these aspects significantly affect the person's own learning process. In addition, Rivera & Solange (2016) find that there is a strong cooperative component in playing games to win, demonstrating that there is indeed an emotional component in learning, which is extremely important for students' social and cognitive development. The teacher's choice of some activities and games over others is mostly driven by children's passions, interests, likes, and sometimes also requests. According to González (2010), students find learning enjoyable because their passions and interests are considered when designing the lesson. The teacher picks games and activities that children like with the aim of having them interested and highly motivated towards the activities without having to worry too much about how to enhance their motivation and active participation during the lesson (Question 5). Moreover, the preference of non-verbal communication, together with the teacher's tendency of choosing in groups or in pairs games and activities, are useful for shy, less confident students because those types of games avoid the activation of the affective filter, since the attention isn't on them individually but it is on the group or pair (Question 4). Þórisdóttir (2020) states that, by playing and doing activities in pairs or in small groups, stress and anxiety can be decreased. Games such as «Red light, Green light» can be a means, according to the teacher, to convey the richness of the language and, by using facial and body expressions connected to the verbal language, it is highlighted the effectiveness of TPR activities as well as the importance of body movement in language learning. The many games provided in every lesson and their variety in the project studied allow children to work on the use of verbal language and on the use of the body to communicate.

Concerning methods and approaches used in the project analysed (Question 2), the Humanistic-affective approach is central and is carried out especially through the already mentioned TPR. The features of this approach are consistent with what stated in Lombardo (2006) and from the data as well. Another approach in use in the project is the Communicative approach, which states that language is action and actions bring to the achievement of a goal, in this case communicating with others. Balboni (2014) affirms that the first and most important function of the language is to communicate, and Caon & Rutka (2004), along with Sigurðardóttir (2010) and Rivera & Solange (2016), add that language becomes a social action through games, since they attract learners to communicate, underlining the importance of using games to enhance communication and build relationships. After the lockdown, when lessons started being carried out outside in the playground, another approach is introduced, that is the Outdoor education approach, used in the lessons together with the Humanistic-affective approach. This approach, according to the teacher, allows experience-based activities to be done and to be carried out outside taking benefit from the natural environment and objects, as well as from the

use of the five senses and of body movement (Question 7). All three approaches can be carried out through games, since games and ludic activities provide the action needed to communicate (Communicative approach), with children being the ones who carry out actively the activity or game (Humanistic-affective approach) both in the classroom and outside in the playground (Outdoor education approach).

Going more deeply into the types of games and activities presented in the project studied (Question 3), singing songs, dancing and music games are abundantly mentioned in the data collected, positively answering to RQ1. Those types of games and activities are, according to the teacher, the perfect activities to link the ludic aspect of language learning with the possibility to use the body to communicate thanks to the TPR and to children's interests and likes, focusing more on non-verbal, body language rather than on verbal communication. Body movement games are indeed widely integrated in the lessons, especially linked to music. By doing «Music stop & go games», children can express themselves freely, by moving to the rhythm, dancing, singing, staying focused and listening to the song in order to carry out the game correctly. According to the teacher, the repetitive use of music related activities in the lessons can enhance children's self-confidence and raise the feeling of being able to speak the language that can lead to an active production of the language (an example is singing along to songs). Data are consistent with Campoverde Conforme (2018), who studies the positive impact that ludic games and activities have on children's confidence. Furthermore, moments of free conversation during the lesson are useful, according to the teacher, both for children who would like to tell something about their day or about something they are passionate about, and for shy, less confident children who can use the body language to convey that information. Among previous studies about the use of music-related activities and games, Passiatore et al. (2019) find that music and music games can decrease anxiety while enhancing proficiency, and Rivera & Solange (2016) agree with them, also stating that music enhances motivation and attention when acquiring language while, at the same time, decreasing anxiety. In addition, Þórisdóttir (2020) states that a great way to engage students in the lesson is to start by singing a song or playing a fun game, which, according to the data collected, is indeed what is done in the project analysed. Every lesson in the project has a moment dedicated to music, whether it is singing songs, dancing or playing music games. Music is broadcasted through a cd player, a mp3 player or a smartphone connected to speakers. During lockdown, youtube becomes an important resource where various materials, such as music videos, songs or other material, can be retrieved and shared with children via chat or played sharing the screen Back to in presence learning, a pleasing and important introduction is the guitar. It takes over for cd players, mp3 players, smartphones, promoting live music and singing to enhance language production. The presence of the guitar is a way to make children aware of music and how it can be created through the instrument and through everyone's voices, instead of just listening to music from devices, favouring the children's active participation through singing along to songs, while also producing meaningful language.

Storytelling is another central part of the lesson, according to the data collected (Question 3). González (2010) states that stories are useful to understand spoken language and learn to listen for general meaning, to infer or make guesses. Body movement is also important when telling a story, since the majority of the stories chosen are interactive stories where children, helped by the teacher, are asked to perform some kind of actions (for example, touch a dot in the page, blow air, tilt the book left or right, etc.). Thus, TPR is incorporated within the storytelling, transforming it into a game.

Using body movement, a passive listening activity like listening to a story becomes an active game that helps learners to internalise new vocabulary. Storytelling is useful to allow children to learn the language, to acquire new vocabulary, to learn the meaning of unknown words helped by drawings or by the context of the story. Stories are read in circle, with the book facing children who are able to clearly see the images. The teacher reads the story, highlighting with the voice, with intonation, the key words of the story, also pointing at the picture corresponding to the word read. Books and stories are a central part of the project, since every year the teacher presents two or three different stories that are read throughout the period of the project. During online learning, both actual books and youtube videos showing the books' pages are used in order to carry out the storytelling. Props such as puppets representing the characters of the story may be integrated in the storytelling to make it more fun and entertaining for children, since watching a screen can be boring and can bring children to be distracted. The fact that stories are interactive is fundamental in order to keep children focused and concentrated on listening, while also having fun, since it is so easy for them to get distracted while sitting still. The repetitiveness of patterns in the stories, together with body movement, encourages children to actively participate, as stated in González (2010), so that it becomes harder for children to get distracted and lose focus on the story. Storytelling is introduced, as the teacher explains, by games that have different purposes; some games help releasing all the extra energy children have left that might be in the way in order to concentrate, others help easing the intuitive comprehension of the story or bring out useful words or sentences children will find in it. González (2010) also underlines the importance of doing pre-reading activities and games to prepare children to understand the story by reinforcing vocabulary and by making them familiar with the language of the story. It can be observed that games are always present in different sections of the lesson; concerning storytelling, they are used to ease comprehension of the activity presented afterwards, helping revising vocabulary and useful expressions linked to the specific activity presented.

Concerning the major objectives set in this project, they are varied; linguistic, learning, and educational (Question 6). The main objective is the authentic use of language and, according to the teacher, the best way to achieve it is through storytelling. Storytelling is extremely useful to connect an authentic use of language, that is expression of spoken language and emotions, to the use of imagination and creativity, together with the funny and entertaining aspect of it. Lombardo (2006) and Caon & Rutka (2004) also underline the importance of having an authentic, significant and beneficial use of the language, stating that it must generate from situations or activities children are in, so that there is an immediate communicative purpose linked to children's interests, that is, communicating something effectively in that moment. Another important aspect that goes along with an authentic use of the language is the use of different learning strategies in the same lesson and in different lessons, to allow children to acquire language using their own set of intelligences in accordance with Gardner's multiple intelligences theory, as already stated above, and learn in the way that suits them best through games that involve the four skills, body language, handcrafting, music and exploration of the environment. Games and ludic activities, widely present in the project studied, are useful to ease the use of different learning strategies and methods while also authentically using the language in a fun way.

3.2 Are ludic activities and games easy to use also in an online learning setting?

Results show that many games and activities used in presence could be adjusted to work also in an online learning setting and be successfully carried out with little to no problems. The games presented are still games that promote an active and authentic use of language, verbally or not, favouring group or in pairs activities that enhance cooperation and communication and avoid stress and anxiety. This statement agrees with Þórisdóttir (2020) who states that, by playing and doing activities in pairs or in small groups, stress and anxiety can be decreased.

Music activities and games are the heart of the lessons also during lockdown, and youtube is the major source of material during online learning, since it has plenty of videos that can be used; educational videos, music videos, but also funny, captivating videos and songs to introduce to the class during the lesson (Question 7). Using youtube videos makes it a lot easier for the teacher to carry out music games and activities via Zoom, since the screen can be shared so that everyone watches and listens to the same video or song at the same time. An aspect that is highlighted by the teacher is that for the first time the material is shared. Children can autonomously go and watch videos or listen to music they enjoy the most even when the lesson is over, whereas before the materials weren't available outside of the classroom. Having free unlimited access to the materials is beneficial for children since, by playing songs and videos many times, unconscious learning takes place, and children acquire the language without knowing they are learning, which also avoids any type of stress of anxiety that would activate the affective filter and affect the learning process. Kirsch (2008) agrees with this statement, since it states that an advantage of music is that children rarely get tired of listening to a song over and over, especially if it is a song they like. It is added that this repetition brings to the acquisition of sounds, words and sentences that can be used in situations other than music-related games and activities. Rivera & Solange (2016) add that, along with the development of pronunciation, singing songs helps diminishing the fear of speaking, since children love singing along to their favourite songs. Using songs in online learning isn't difficult because it doesn't require substantial changes going from an in presence setting to an online one. A change worth highlighting is that, after lockdown, music is played live from the teacher, who plays the guitar while singing songs (Question 7b). This choice has been necessary to detoxify from the amount of time spent in front of technological devices. The teacher observed that children, especially very young children, are more active in singing along to songs when music is live compared to when it is broadcasted through devices.

Youtube is also useful to carry out storytelling during online learning. A problem is found in the data about online learning concerning how to read the book while also showing it on camera to children, so that they can follow along with the story. To overcome this problem, the teacher finds videos that show the single pages of the book, so that she is able to read the story more easily and children can follow along by watching the video. Moreover, she transforms storytelling in a sort of theatrical live animation of the story by introducing few real props to the reading, such as puppets, adding excitement and interest due to the curiosity of knowing when a certain prop would pop up on camera. Thus, storytelling becomes a game itself and the fact that there isn't that active, non-verbal interaction anymore stimulates the teacher to look for new ways to keep them motivated and engaged in listening to the story.

Movement games in an online learning setting can be extremely hard to carry out; yet the teacher was able to successfully adjust activities and games in order to be done via

Zoom, such as scavage hunts, only requiring an empty space, big enough to allow children to move freely (Question 7). According to the teacher, body movement games related to music and exploration are fundamental to make children move during the lockdown times. After hours of school where they sat still, they have the chance to move, to burn off all the extra energy they have and enjoy this moment of playing together. The social aspect of playing is still present even behind a screen, since it is important for the teacher to promote relationships and give children the opportunity to express themselves freely also when distant (Question 7). Data collected show that, even if children are physically distant, games are able to connect them and the teacher and to continue building those important relationships.

The most difficult activity to present online, according to the teacher, is the manual workshop. Nevertheless, she manages to carry out this activity, helped by the children's parents who assist children physically in doing the work, also helping to keep them focused on the task and don't get distracted (Question 7). Back in presence, the manual workshop is a means to develop children's creativity by using the five senses and exploring the environment, the nature around them, to find leaves, sticks, flowers etc. and use them in their work, stimulating their fantasy. Children are encouraged to play with the objects they create during the workshop and to use their imagination to transform those objects into something else, for example a rock might become a car (Question 7). It can be stated that the manual workshop isn't as easy to carry out in online learning as it is in class, especially without the parents' help in younger group ages.

Another difficulty of online learning is planning the lessons anew, since classes behind the screen were completely different to regular classes carried out before (Question 7b). Furthermore, she had to adapt everything overnight. In planning online lessons, she starts from ready to use material, such as videos and songs, and links games to it. Importance is underlined on the fact that materials should be entertaining and highly motivating for learners so that they can come up with thoughts and observations to share with the class to start conversations. Children are positively surprised and motivated by the teacher's originality in creating and adapting games to be carried out through a screen, also witnessing a huge difference between online meetings and school lessons, expressing their desire to participate every time through positive feedback (Question 8). Children's positive feedback and their high levels of motivation can be seen as a teacher's success in easing learning also in an online setting. Concerning lessons back in presence, there is more freedom about what activities and games to carry out, starting from children's requests or interests (Questions 7-7b). Rivera & Solange (2016) find that learners' active participation in the learning process can increase their motivation and interest. Having the possibility to choose which games to do is important in order to make learners active in their own learning, as previously stated. Inevitably, in doing so, the lesson is very flexible and is adjusted to each group. Children are free to play games they like as well as to play games that the teacher proposes. For this reason, lesson plans are created after the lesson is over. It is important to pinpoint that online lessons weren't carried out with kindergarteners, since the teacher already struggled to adjust activities and to modify materials for older group ages. To sum up, many activities and games aren't difficult to carry out online, since they need no changes at all or just few little adjustments. However, there are few activities that are indeed hard to carry out online, even though it isn't impossible to successfully accomplish them.

3.3 Further issues about live music

It is worth noticing, even if it isn't necessarily a focus of this research, that when the teacher started playing and singing live music during the lessons instead of broadcasting it, she noticed an enhancement in children's linguistic production, also in kindergarteners, because children are more encouraged to sing along to live music rather than to recorded music (Question 7). Kirsch (2008) states that the use of songs leads to the acquisition of sounds and words that, later, would lead to an active pronunciation of those sounds and words accurately and with meaningful expression in contexts different from singing songs. Live music is found to enhance a spontaneous and natural linguistic production that is children randomly singing bits and pieces of songs in class, after the lesson (Question 8). Live music and singing songs bring children to listen to their voices and the different sounds they can do with it. It is worth noticing that the teacher mentions that this linguistic production has been missing in her project for quite some time.

The research study presented an overview on how English is learned through games and ludic activities in the EFL project called «L'inglese un gioco da…bimbi». However, it presents some limits, starting from the small population considered and the types of data collected. Therefore, this study can't be representative of a larger population, but it can give a general idea about how the game-based approach is integrated in this specific EFL learning project.

3.4 Limits of the study

The study provided here can't be representative of a bigger population or compared to other study cases similar to this. The first reason is that the number of data collected isn't adequate to broaden the results to a larger population, since a single interview to a single teacher doesn't allow a complete and exhaustive overview on the results obtained. The second reason is that the research was conducted on a very specific population, so its context is the one of the «L'inglese un gioco da…bimbi» project, and results can be applied only to it. However, results can be useful to consider how games and ludic activities are included in this English project, and also how those games and activities were modified in order to fit in an online learning environment.

Chapter 4: CONCLUSION

Playing has proved to be important in learning, especially from a very young age. Learning is becoming more and more student-centred, active and dynamic also thanks to the introduction of games and ludic activities in language learning classes.

This study aimed to evaluate to what extent games and ludic activities are integrated in the EFL setting considered in this thesis, as well as whether these activities, usually carried out in presence, are easy to accomplish also in an online learning setting. The research was carried out by doing a semi-structured interview with open questions to an English teacher. The interview was conducted via Zoom, it was recorded and then transcribed manually. Results were analysed and then discussed by comparing them with results of previous studies in literature. The findings helped us answering our 2 research questions.

In particular, regarding RQ 1, it can be said that games and ludic activities are fundamental and well-incorporated in this EFL teaching project, since most of the activities have playful characteristics, from music games, dancing and songs to interactive

storytelling and role plays. It is underlined the importance of using various activities and games to enhance motivation and interest and also to carry out an authentic use of language. TPR (Total Physical Response) and body movement activities, together with music games, are widely used in the project, due to the teacher's predilection to introduce non-verbal activities to support shy students in learning the language without anxiety by making it an enjoyable experience. The teacher chooses activities and games taking into consideration children's passions, interests, likes, and sometimes also requests, with the goal of keeping children interested and highly motivated towards the whole activity without having to worry much about how to enhance their motivation and their active participation in the lesson. The Humanistic-affective approach is central, together with the Communicative and the Outdoor education approaches, and is carried out especially through TPR activities and games.

Regarding RQ 2, results show that many games and activities proposed in presence could be adjusted to work also in an online learning setting and be successfully carried out without too many problems. The games presented during online lessons are still games that encourage an active and authentic use of language, verbal or non-verbal, through in group or in pairs activities that enhance cooperation and communication while avoiding stress and anxiety. Music activities and games are central in the lessons, and youtube has been the major source of material since it has plenty of videos that can be used; educational videos, music videos, but also funny, captivating videos and songs to introduce to the class during the lesson. For the first time the material is shared, so children can autonomously watch videos or listen to music presented in the lesson even when it is over, whereas before the materials weren't available outside of the classroom. Having free unlimited access to the materials is beneficial for children since unconscious learning takes place by playing songs and videos many times, and children acquire the language without knowing they are actually learning. The fact that there isn't an active, non-verbal interaction in online learning stimulates the teacher to look for new ways to keep children motivated and engaged when playing and listening to stories. Data show that, even if children were physically distant, games have been able to connect them and the teacher and to continue to build important social relationships. Movement games in an online learning setting can be extremely hard to carry out but the teacher successfully adjusted activities and games to be done via Zoom; body movement games, especially the ones related to music and exploration, have been fundamental to make children move during the lockdown period. The most difficult activity to carry out in an online learning setting, according to the results, has been the manual workshop. Nevertheless, the teacher managed to carry out this activity helped, especially with younger children, by the parents. Another difficulty of online learning has been planning the lessons anew, since classes behind the screen have been completely different from in presence ones. Furthermore, due to the rapidity of the closure of schools due to the pandemic, she had to adapt everything overnight. Children have been positively surprised and motivated by the teacher's originality in creating and adapting games to be carried out through a screen and expressed their desire to participate every time by giving positive feedback.

Further issues have arisen in the study (paragraph 3.3), like the fact that when the teacher introduced guitar playing and live singing in the lesson, instead of broadcasting songs through digital devices, she noticed an enhancement in children's linguistic production, also in kindergarteners. Children are found to be more encouraged to sing along to live music rather than to recorded music. The teacher mentioned that this type of linguistic production has been missing in her project for quite some time, highlighting the

importance of live music to enhance spontaneous and natural linguistic productions, such as children randomly singing bits and pieces of songs in class after the lesson is over.

Materials were collected and analysed to understand to what extent they were helpful in enriching the English learning experience. Props and other materials were used in games and ludic activities in order to make them funnier, more enjoyable, and more interesting for learners, and also to ease language learning, involving children more during the activities and games. They were useful to enhance an active and authentic use of the language, allowing children to practise the language without fear or anxiety. They were also useful to boost curiosity and motivation, increasing concentration throughout the whole lesson.

Although these findings cannot be generalised, they show that games can be an important part of the lesson given certain circumstances, and that they can facilitate learning a foreign language when used with kindergartener, children and pre-teens. It can be also said that ludic activities can be efficiently adjusted and adapted to fit in an online learning setting and carried out without major problems. Obviously, further research should be devoted to this, especially after the pandemic time and the teaching and learning challenges recently experienced.

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APPENDIX A

[full interview in English]

1 How would you describe the founding principles of your work, of the approach you use in your project?

When I created "L'inglese un gioco da…bimbi®", the central point of this approach was not to follow teaching units, predefined topics, but to meet those children in total full immersion, and do activities with them that were the ones children loved, that is playing, moving, working with their hands, so crafting, creating. I didn't even call them lessons, I called them meetings, language laboratories that were structured, so they didn't have free moments, but everything was conceived, made and tailored for them and on them. This means that I had to base my choices on age groups, that is to follow their cognitive development as well as their passions, that are connected to their age. Besides this personalisation, there was the focus on the single person and on the group. It is clear that such meticulous work can be done only in small groups and not with the whole class, even though I actually realised projects with entire classes. This structuring the meetings considering their desire to move, play, of healthy competition, of handcrafting, also worked in the class (we are talking about elementary school classes), even though I always preferred a group division of the class.

Over the last 11 years, children have changed a lot due to a big exposition to technology and consequently my approach has adapted. In a planned laboratory, there isn't this "all and now" typical of online gaming, but you must wait for your turn and respect others' times and peculiarities.

2 Why are games and TPR (Total Physical Response) activities so important in your classes?

Playing is the natural and spontaneous way that allows the child to learn; through game-based activities, for example symbolic playing or exploration, the child discovers, experiences, and thus learns. The TPR method is essential because when the child is playing, they aren't playing using only the mind, but they are playing using the entire body. The child learns by moving, by doing.

In the TPR we [teachers] don't ask the child to use his cognitive abilities, but we use the body language to move their body, which is the authentic way to use the language. The language is a means for doing other than for communication, and the TPR method is the perfect exemplification. If I say "Come and bring me your jacket" to a child while they are coming in because I want to hang their jacket, I won't tell them "Vieni e portami

la giacca" right after, but I will help them using the body language, for example by pointing at the jacket, making the gesture for him to come closer. Certainly, the exposition to the language, helps the children passing from intuition to real understanding. Another simple example. I turn the music on, I start moving and I say "let's dance!", or the classic "stand up!", without translating it; children copy it and next time eventually use the sentence in the right situation.

3 How did a typical lesson work? How was it structured?

Previously I said that this kind of approach, before the pandemic, was definitely structured; I'm going to explain how. Undoubtedly, there was a very important part that was the first one, the welcoming. The welcoming was made in English full immersion and usually the children would talk and tell me something about them, about their day and I would answer in English, but this didn't bother them, it wasn't a problem, because the body language was predominant. So, first a welcoming through conversation and then through an activity (usually a song) that was always the same, because this gave the children confidence and made them feel able to speak the language.

After that, there was always a mediator ploy that somehow justified the fact that the teacher was speaking in a different language (because often the children at some point figured out that I was Italian, even though I did anything to avoid it) but especially this trick created the red thread of the meeting. I have been using, and still use, some old suitcases that captivated the children a lot, precisely because they were old, something they didn't see every day, but mostly because suitcases recalled travelling. Many of the children, in the beginning, asked me "Have you come here by train or by plane?" because they were truly convinced that I came from a trip.

The mediator ploy led us to the first activity which usually was a game, aimed at the intuitive comprehension of the story that I would have told later. The games were thought to bring out the language, the words and the sentences that the children would have encountered in the story. Games involving movement were the first ones, whose goal was to increase the energy to the highest point, then there were slow down games, which led them back to a status of listening, preparing them to the story.

The stories, that I still choose now, were stories written mostly by illustrators, because the stories must be more illustrated than written, and I didn't follow the age groups the books were aimed to, because often times books meant for a lower age group present such beautiful stories that can be appreciated also by older children, adjusting or varying the language used. There was a verbal language and a non-verbal language, a body language, and there was also an interaction with the children, so there were times where the books were read sitting down while other times children had to stand up and do what the book told, making it an authentic animated reading.

We finished our meeting with final greetings, which also was repeated at every meeting because it gave confidence and because children liked it, but this didn't mean that the songs of moments of welcoming and final greetings had to be the same every time. The reason is that children (and this was the first thing I have been noticing through the years) get tired of doing the same things; on one hand, they need certainties thanks to the routine but, on the other hand, they always need new inputs.

4 What were the most frequent activities in your lessons? Did they prefer certain activities more than others? How did you choose the activities?

The games the children liked the least were the too competitive ones, even if for the adult it was a healthy competition, it had to be calibrated, modified to "in pairs, in small groups", trying to find the cooperative learning as much as possible, even though there weren't conflicts in the group. One aspect that changed through the years was that some children didn't like the "maximum energy point" and they needed it to stop sooner; so, it was fundamental that the "energy" moment lasted the proper length and was followed by a "slow down" moment. This required an incredible individual observational ability while playing with them, because sometimes you, as an educator, didn't realise that maybe the child that seemed more involved was suffering the situation a bit.

A classic, very loved game was "Red light, Green light"; I usually did it animals-themed, so it could be introduced not only the single animal's name, but also its action. The single words put together aren't enough to speak; a language needs actions, adjectives, adverbs, expressions. Another objective of teaching language is indeed to transmit the richness of the language. This game allowed me to make them act and focus more on the facial and body expression and connect it to the verbal language, carrying out the effectiveness of linguistic acquisition of the TPR. This way, the linguistic acquisition through TPR is clearly effective. This game clearly showed the importance of body language, in particular the characterisation of the role playing. This was connected to what I was talking about at the beginning, the "all and now"; when I asked the children to do the lions, most of them mimed it in a superficial way, maybe just roaring. I needed to recall them that the lion crawls on all fours, opens its mouth and yawns, has big teeth, claws etc. So, "Red light, green light" allowed me to bring them back to the pleasure of symbolic game. It still was authentic playing, because they were all together and they had fun even just for the fact that they were running all together, that they were moving together.

Another game children really enjoyed were games linked to body expression through music, for example "music stop & go" games. There wasn't a guided instruction of dancing, it was really self-expression, keeping the rhythm, which had an important educational value. As educators, we couldn't take for granted that the children would listen to the music while doing a music game, because they usually were more attracted to the challenge in the game itself. It was very important to start the competition only when the children were really connected with their listening. When I used to play music through devices (radio, cd player, mp3…) I used to let the children feel the vibrations on the speakers. If the children are really connected, they would appreciate any version of this game, like acting something strange, like a monster, or miming an animal when the music was on.

Games that allowed me to give them a level were interesting for children as well as for educators. I was not interested in level of linguistic improvement, but I focused on activities that enabled me to add different goals through the game, thus keeping interest and motivation high.

An example of a "slow down" game the children liked a lot was the concentration game called "Guess which one is missing"; using a cloth, some objects were covered, then two or three of them disappeared and the children had to guess which of those elements disappeared. They would play this game endlessly. In that moment they were sitting down, absolutely connected with their ears, their bodies and their eyes; this game was the best way, without them knowing it, to make them concentrate. That is the key sentence, "without them knowing it", and it is extremely important in order to lead them in a natural way towards the objectives. The teacher of course must have some objectives,

but children mustn't notice them. As to the learning goals, they should be more horizontal.

The storytelling was really loved by the children, but we had to be extremely careful to the kinds of stories, because sometimes there were beautiful stories for every age group that maybe didn't work for a specific group. As a teacher, it has been necessary to look at the children and do a self-evaluation on the modalities and strategies of storytelling. For example, telling a story without conveying emotions, "on autopilot", wouldn't make an impact, even though the children were apparently listening to you. This sensory perception the children have must be taken into consideration.

I'm going to make an example of a game that didn't work with kindergarteners: the classic game "Witch commands colour…", that the children really liked in Italian; but when they heard from the English expert the request to go and touch a colour, they were able to, like a psychotherapist said, "smell school even if they haven't had nothing to do with the school yet". That's why we had to "trick" them without them noticing, maybe adding something, for example, reaching the colour in a funny way, taking benefit from body movement. As far as I'm concerned, I didn't do the game "Witch commands colour" to verify whether the children knew the colours or not, but it was a game that allowed them to concentrate, to connect, because they must listen in order to play and therefore learn. If they weren't connected, physically and mentally present, right in that moment, it was difficult to do a more complicated game, with perhaps few more rules.

The Game of the forest, for example, allowed me to grab their attention on me guiding the game, and on the game itself. In this game the teacher is a tree, and since the tree has roots it can't move, but it waves in the wind and its branches, the arms, are able to catch the children, who pretend to be small animals. I usually choose the same animal for everybody, so they all move in the same way, because it is also important not to give too many different inputs at the same time. So, if they were all rabbits they had to jump, not run, and when I stretched and I touched one of them, the bunny became another tree, until we became a big forest, and the winners were the few children who weren't touched. The children really enjoyed this game but, if there wasn't enough attention, understanding those two simple rules in another language wasn't so easy.

Another example of a game the children enjoyed was "Simon says", which I didn't like personally, it looked like an educational game to me, but they really loved it, so I did it anyways. With the younger children, I usually did just the action and they copied me, then I didn't do it anymore and whoever didn't do the action when they had to was eliminated. After that we did a Level 2, which was the original game; if I didn't say "Simon says", they mustn't copy the action. In order to make it more my own, I replaced Simon (since we don't know who Simon is) with a concrete puppet, a mediator ploy, who whispered in my ear the actions the children had to do, but if I didn't say (let's say its name was Oscar) "Oscar says", Oscar didn't say it, so it was elimination.

5 We have talked about the activities the children loved the most… Did you prefer doing activities that you know the children liked, even though you didn't, instead of proposing activities that you liked but the children didn't?

Clearly, at the very beginning, I was captivated by activities that I liked, and I tried them with the children, but then the tables have turned immediately. Consider that, at the beginning, the research of games has been almost encyclopaedic; my first meetings and laboratories were a testing, almost every time, of something different, and many different things. I didn't give continuity to the activities because I wanted to get to know the

children first, as well as test the approach I was developing. This was another big challenge. I would say that proposing the games they loved was a good start of the lesson for me, that let me live that moment comfortably as an English expert. Looking at the children's reactions and emotions I got to know them.

Conversation during "slow down" activities was a special moment both for children who were free to express themselves verbally ("I enjoyed it", "I love you", that means "I enjoyed that thing you did, I'm in, I trust you"), and also for the reluctant speakers who used the body language to get in contact with the teacher (hugging you or asking you for help in Italian).

6 Previously you told me that the teacher needs to have objectives. What are the learning, linguistic and educational objectives that you set? Which activities lead you to the achievement of these goals?

It is important to set learning objectives that are suitable to the situations lived from the group ages I address and based on their passions, interests, and that have as focus point the authentic use of the language. Like I have already said, the key sentence is "without the children noticing", because it is important to lead them to the objectives in the most natural way.

The language objectives are present, but are more cross-cutting, horizontal, because they're tied to a book. For example, a book isn't just about colours, numbers etc., it isn't divided in teaching units. A book, in my opinion, must tell a story, and not say "this is a cow, this is the colour red", because this is a "my first words" book, and this isn't what I choose to read to them. I choose books that have a story that stimulates their fantasy, their imagination, their creativity (and not books about children's rules and correct behaviours), that tell something attractive and funny for the children. Storytelling is a means that allows to transmit the authenticity of the language, with its expressions of spoken language, emotions, and it is also the tool through which curiosity towards what is unknown, what isn't familiar, that is the cultural aspect of the language, is stimulated in a creative way.

Using different teaching and learning methods, instead of a single one, allows the children to benefit from every type of intelligence they have. The Total Physical Response allows them to use their entire body and the 5 senses to actively learn the language, through the exploration of the reality they are in; music, meant as singing and body expression following the rhythm, enhances the active linguistic production of the children; handcrafting, meant as preferential means to convey the language in an authentic way; games, finally, as leitmotif of every activity aimed to learning the language in the most active and spontaneous way, while having fun.

7 What have been the major changes because of this pandemic and lockdown in: methodologies, kind of activities proposed, ways in which those activities are carried out?

Regarding the methodologies adopted during the pandemic, there's the need to do a small digression on what have been the methods during the period of lockdown, while teaching online and not in person. The structure of the lesson that I previously explained to you has lost some key points, for example the welcoming and final greetings have been replaced by a moment of conversation (because I have seen it as necessary) in Italian, so not in English full immersion anymore. Another change during the lockdown has been

the use of music paired with well-made videos; short, with clear, comprehensible images (the same criteria I use for books), that communicate something and convey emotions along with the story. I've used these videos also as a gift for the children, as a bond between me and them. I have never given homework, but these videos (obviously the ones that excited them the most) have become a thread that binds us; there wasn't a "in person" relationship, but there was "Marcella's gift", "Marcella's English pills". This has had a very strong impact because, before that moment, all the educational material (music, songs, books…) remained in the class, but now those resources are out of the classroom and have entered the children's homes, who can watch or listen to them as many times they want. Repetition as a passive request doesn't lead anywhere; but watching and rewatching something because you like it leads to learning indeed. If you relisten to a song, you sing it, you dance to its rhythm over and over, unconscious learning takes place. Another thing I had to change during the lockdown period has been the storytelling, since it was quite complicated to read stories with the book facing the webcam; I have sometimes used already made youtube videos that showed the book flipped through, shot from above. But because I felt bad about not having the book in my hands, I have used technology to create some storytelling where sometimes there were the pages in frame and other times there were actual props, almost like theatrical games done using the screen. Through the webcam, a puppet, a rattle or else suddenly popped out and it was the funniest thing, especially for the children 5-7 years old, because it was a surprise, it made them laugh, it was like a cartoon animation but done live.

Concerning remote learning, the physical part, the body movement couldn't be missing, in fact it's been essential; children had to log in and be in a space that was (based on what they had) free from tables, chairs, and so on in order to be able to move (this was my only request). That was also the crucial difference compared to the school that, instead, asked them to log on seated as if they were at school, but "as if" doesn't work for a child. The child requires a positive effect, an enjoyment of what he is doing. Sitting at school, as exhausting as it may be, is less exhausting, because there is a continuous relationship with the teacher and with the classmates that makes you forget that you are seated, and this relationship is the part of socialising. Sitting still behind the screen is a real torture for a child of any age.

I have been able, instead, to make them dance, to do all the "music stop & go" games, I have even done "treasure hunts" of any kind; for example, they had to run and look for an object I asked them to find, or (if they couldn't find it) they had to draw it, and they had to be very fast because the first one that came back with the object was the winner. This game combined movement, exploration of their own houses and the ability to observe familiar environments that they have never looked at so closely before. It hasn't been missing the manual workshop either. It hasn't been easy indeed because, while I was doing the craft, I had to, at the same time, film what I was doing, and it was needed the right equipment, that allowed me to move too. But with what we had I have been able to manage it. Also, an educational aspect has been dealt with; the performance anxiety that children sometimes have, and being distant, could have made it grow exponentially. My approach of all manual workshops done had the purpose of promoting the relationship, taking a moment to be together, and appreciate whatever would've come out, regardless of the laboratories being guided.

Similar to those things was having a snack together; since many groups were in the time slot of snacking and they logged in that they were still eating (when we were doing lesson in person they used to have a snack before coming in), I decided to have it all

together, since those ten minutes wouldn't have penalised the lesson, but on the contrary that time was an input to new expressions, questions, in another language.

When we went back from remote learning to in presence learning, there have been necessarily other changes; all the things I have learnt to do, to create, during the lockdown period, made me realise what the children really need, so I had no choice but changing again, and it has been very stressful. The approach changed; in addition to the humanistic-affective I use the outdoor education approach, where not only the lessons are made outside, but the approach with all its elements is respected. Since May 2021, when I started working in the schools again, I have done outdoor education projects in English. It was in that moment that I eliminated the conversation in Italian. It hasn't been a pushed transition, it has been quite natural instead, since the outdoor education approach opens up to the possibility of doing experience-based activities and using the language while doing is absolutely natural. Concerning the routine, the welcoming and the final greetings segments have become less and less structured. For example, the "name song" that I invented where, instead of directly asking the child their name, I ask the other children to help me find out their name, was requested not because they repeated the names, but because to every name was associated an action (and this made them move and have fun), and it became a game, so much so that the following times they were the ones proposing the actions associated to each name. In this game, the attention shifts from the single person to the group, creating cooperation between them. The input of this song is authentic because I don't speak in Italian, I only speak in English, and I truly need to know the children's names after I introduced myself. This game, however, doesn't last long, because after the first three meetings I have obviously learnt their names and the game has lost its efficacy. This activity hasn't been done anymore from the moment they stopped asking me to do it. It has been replaced by other activities, for example a body warm up when it was cold outside, or I would start directly with a game. Another adjustment has been that the music isn't broadcasted through devices anymore, a sort of rejection of anything that is technology (even though I love technology and I think that it mustn't be left out of the development process of children, since it is part of their lives). However, right after the months we have spent in our homes, it is necessary to detoxify, to come back to the origins. Music is made with the voice, obviously, but also using musical instruments, and that is why I introduced the guitar; the music that is sung in my lessons now it is solely and exclusively the music that I sing and play, and that the children sing along with me. I have noticed a higher language production compared to when I used to broadcast music via devices (smartphone, speakers, youtube…). Live music enhances it at any age, also with little children of 3- and 4-year-olds. Another change regarding the methods has been realising the importance of experiencing, no longer just and exclusively the game per se, but games that are experiences, exploration. The activities that remained are certainly the storytelling, the music, but simply live, and the games, especially the ones that allow movement, exploration, use of the body. Concerning the storytelling, it has always been linked to the topic. It is done in a very animated way, with a lot of role-playing, dramatisation from the teacher who reads the story, and also with much involvement from the children, who are invited by the story to actively participate. Since May 2021, I tell the stories as I used to before; an improvement has been that the children can move in a freer way compared to when we had classes indoor and the possibility to touch with their hands, and their 5 senses, everything that surrounds them. Essentially, the way of telling a story has remained the same; the only thing that has changed is that it isn't as much linked to a topic as it was before. Like the

storytelling, the manual workshop is a way to carry on a theme by using not only the TPR as a strategy but is also a stimulus of creativity and of the sense of touch, of pure craftsmanship. Since the meetings have been outdoor, there has been space for many possibilities of working with their hands, starting from digging together to find worms or small rocks, during free game, or creating a path where imaginary cars represented by natural materials (leaves, rocks, etc.) can race. On the other hand, there can be a guided manual workshop, stimulated by observing the world around us. An example is the natural bracelet, a paper band where, while having a walk or doing a treasure hunt, each child can collect what attracts them the most, even the soil, and using it to create their own bracelets. The natural bracelet is the classic example of what it isn't a craft project; it isn't created to be brought home and saved, but it is an experience that starts and ends there. So much so that, after creating it, they play with the bracelet using their fantasy, for example saying that it is a magic bracelet that makes you do magic thing, like animal sounds, weird movements, and the children, after the first example, are the ones who move the bracelet and propose what the bracelet transforms into. The bracelet by the end of the day is gone or broken, but it has accomplished the main function of the work, that is, to use the hands to create, letting themselves being stimulated by many elements, and fly with fantasy, turning it into a game. Other workshops that can be done are the ones where the children are guided to use natural materials as well as non-natural materials. Why this? Because this mix is another stimulus to not stay rigid in the context you are in, but to open up and find other possibilities. The workshop, now, isn't linked to a topic, but is linked to the children and their observations.

Regarding the final greetings, before the pandemic I already stopped singing the "goodbye song" because I saw that the children weren't enthusiastic anymore, they were happier to sing the welcoming song than the final one, I don't know the reason, and I don't think it had to do with the type of music or else, and so, gradually, I sang it while we were putting on the jackets or I didn't sing it at all. Now I use "bans", where someone says a sentence and other repeats it, back and forth, usually rhyming, and keeping the rhythm with the feet or the hands, to draw the attention to those sentences, to that concrete communication that is the form of greeting ("it's time to go, see you next time!").

7b Okay, now let's talk about the lesson planning. When and in what way is it created? What about during the lockdown, in remote learning? How did lesson planning work?

During the pandemic I did brand new lesson plans. During the lockdown months, when we had to stay at home, I started from… sometimes I even started from a song I liked because it had nice moves, a nice beat, and I connected a game to it. So, basically, I did the opposite: I started from a teaching-learning resource, for example a nice video that showed landscapes, lesser-known animals, and from that started the game. I started from a resource that could grab their attention and motivation. Sometimes I couldn't finish what I planned because the video stimulated many observations, thoughts.

We can say that the lesson plan, now, is created after the lesson. Once the meeting is over, I group together the activities, because I always start from the children, from what they'd like to do, What I mean is that there is a more fluent organisation of the meeting. It doesn't mean that at the beginning of the lesson there is always the same song, and the activities aren't always guided but they emerge from the free playing I take part to asking them if I can join, leaving the children that freedom to share or not their play space with me. However, when I leave them this freedom, almost all of them expect me to bring

them something instead (a new game, a challenge, a surprise that comes out from bags or suitcases…) and sometimes they explicitly ask me: "what are we going to do today?" "Let's play! (pointing at the playground area in the backyard)" "Are you going home?" "No, I'll stay with you. Can I play with you?" "Play with us!". Thanks to the relationship of trust and of frequency, this request drops; so they either propose games or, by physically being there together, they can bring out my proposals in a natural way and these proposals are, again, naturally and spontaneously welcomed or not by the children.

8 What has been the children's response to those changes that needed to be done (also in terms of motivation, attention, enjoyment of the activities, etc.)?

During lockdown, as I already said, there wasn't a well-defined routine anymore, but, for example, they always asked me to do the treasure hunt; so, we might say, that they have been the ones to initiate a new routine, they have decided that there should've been a day dedicated to that game. I presented activities that were much different from each other but had a common topic. I have to say that I left out from the online meetings all children aged 3-5, and I focused on children of elementary and middle school, also because I was already very busy modifying and adapting strategies, methodologies and games. For example, I have created many powerpoints for the primary school, that aren't simple passive listening ones, but they have an image, then a game, for example of dices, then a board game where, in fact, the "board" is the screen.

The children's reaction to the online meeting has been of great surprise and involvement, also because the experience of online learning has been, generally speaking, very bad: little children's involvement, many lectures, not much time dedicated to self-expression and of their emotions. Their feedbacks are always positive, outlining great involvement and the desire to log on every time.

Going back to school (kindergarten) after the lockdown period has been extremely different both for me and for the children. First of all, now we meet in the garden instead of meeting in the school's hall, the activities have become fewer but more explorative, of movement, and with more time available to do them. I have gone back to English full immersion, I don't speak Italian while I am at school, and the objects I bring are just the essentials; not suitcases full of inputs, props or else, but one o two elements that are functional to the game (for ex. a ball, some boxes, some colours, a book, etc.). Finally, a constant presence, the guitar. When I look at them, I see children that are more focused on the present, and don't need to get out of the reality they are living in that moment, I see curious children that ask me to do that game or activity again and who don't need to be the focus of attention, to be looked at. This happens due to the spontaneity in which the activities are carried out and for the respect the times of every child. Concerning attention, the moment when we are in circle aren't weighted anymore from the continuous recalls to look at who is talking, but are now fun moments, moments of playing, that become a further chance to try to say some words in English. Transitions, that are difficult switches from an activity to another, also become playful moments, where the children interact by saying small sentences in English; for example, "Let's go!" or "Circle, let's make a circle" which they repeat perfectly and exactly in the situation. Finally, music sung and played live is a driving force that leads anyone (with very few exceptions) to sing and, by doing so, to listen to their own voices making different sounds without being scared about it. The validation is that in class they sing out loud parts of songs they have learnt with me. This spontaneous and natural linguistic production has

been missing for a few years in my projects even though the children have been always happy and involved in the activities I presented.

APPENDIX B

[full interview in Italian]

1 Come descriveresti i punti su cui si fonda il tuo lavoro, dell'approccio che usi nel tuo progetto?

Quando ho creato il mio marchio "l'inglese un gioco da bimbi®" il punto centrale dell'approccio era il fatto di non seguire delle unità didattiche, degli argomenti predefiniti, ma di incontrare questi bambini in totale full immersion, e con loro fare attività che sono le attività che i bambini amano, ovvero giocare, muoversi, lavorare con le mani, quindi manualità, creatività. Non le chiamavo neanche lezioni ma incontri, laboratori linguistici che erano strutturati, che cioè non avevano parti libere, ma era tutto pensato, cucito e confezionato per loro e su di loro. Questo significa che dovevo fare delle scelte basandomi sulle fasce d'età, seguendo il loro sviluppo cognitivo ma anche le loro passioni, che sono legate anche all'età. Oltre a questa personalizzazione c'era l'attenzione all'individuo e al gruppo.

È chiaro che un lavoro così minuzioso può essere realizzato nel piccolo gruppo, non certo con la classe intera, nonostante io abbia realizzato progetti anche con le classi intere. Questo strutturare gli incontri tenendo conto del desiderio di movimento, di giocare, di sana competizione, di lavorare con le mani ha funzionato anche nella classe (stiamo parlando delle classi della scuola primaria), anche se ho sempre prediletto una divisione della classe in gruppi.

In 11 anni i bambini sono cambiati molto, soprattutto a causa di una forte esposizione alla tecnologia, e di conseguenza il mio approccio si è adattato. In un laboratorio strutturato, non c'è il "tutto e subito" che è tipico dei giochi online, ma bisogna aspettare il proprio turno e rispettare i tempi e le particolarità degli altri.

2 Perché sono così importanti per te i giochi e le attività TPR nelle tue lezioni?

Il gioco è la modalità naturale e spontanea che permette al bambino di imparare; attraverso le attività ludiche, che possono essere per esempio gioco simbolico o l'esplorazione, il bambino scopre, sperimenta e quindi impara.

Il metodo TPR è fondamentale perché il bambino, quando gioca, non gioca solo utilizzando la mente, ma gioca utilizzando tutto il corpo. Nella Total Physical Response noi insegnanti non chiediamo al bambino di utilizzare le sue capacità cognitive, ma utilizziamo il linguaggio del corpo per far loro muovere il proprio corpo, che è la modalità autentica dell'uso della lingua. La lingua è uno strumento per fare oltre che per comunicare, e il TPR ne è l'esempio perfetto. Se dico a un bambino "come and bring me your jacket" quando stanno entrando perché voglio appendere la giacca, non gli dirò subito dopo "vieni e portami la giacca", ma lo aiuterò usando il linguaggio del corpo, per esempio indicando la giacca, facendo il gesto di avvicinarsi. Ovviamente, l'esposizione alla lingua aiuterà i bambini a passare dall'intuizione ad una vera comprensione. Altro esempio più semplice: accendo la musica, inizio a muovermi e dico "let's dance!", o il classico "stand up!" senza tradurre; i bambini mi copieranno e probabilmente nell'incontro successivo useranno la frase nella situazione corretta.

3 Com'era strutturata una lezione tipo?

Prima ho detto che questo tipo di approccio, prima della pandemia, era sicuramente strutturato; racconto in che modo. Sicuramente c'era una parte importantissima che era quella iniziale, l'accoglienza. L'accoglienza era fatta in English full immersion dove di solito i bambini parlavano e raccontavano di sé e io rispondevo in inglese, ma questo non disturbava, non era un problema, perché il linguaggio del corpo era predominante. Quindi, per prima cosa l'accoglienza sotto forma di conversazione e subito dopo un'attività (di solito una canzone) che si ripeteva sempre, perché questo che dava sicurezza ai bambini, li faceva sentire in grado di parlare la lingua.

Dopodiché c'era sempre uno stratagemma mediatore che in qualche maniera giustificava l'utilizzo della lingua inglese da parte dell'insegnante, (perché molto spesso i bambini ad un certo punto scoprivano che ero italiana anche se avevo fatto di tutto per evitarlo) ma, in particolar modo, questo stratagemma tesseva il filo rosso dell'incontro. Per anni ho usato, e uso ancora oggi, delle vecchie valigie che attiravano molto i bambini proprio perché erano vecchie, lontane da quello che vedevano tutti i giorni, ma soprattutto perché richiamavano il viaggio. Tanti bambini all'inizio mi dicevano "sei venuta col treno o con l'aereo?" perché erano convinti veramente che io arrivassi da un viaggio.

Lo stratagemma mediatore ci portava alla prima attività, che di solito era un gioco, finalizzato alla comprensione intuitiva della storia che avrei raccontato successivamente. I giochi erano veramente studiati e pensati perché facessero emergere il linguaggio, le parole e le frasi che i bambini avrebbero incontrato nella storia. I giochi di movimento venivano fatti per primi, e il loro scopo era aumentare le energie fino al punto massimo, poi successivamente si facevano giochi di slow down, che li riportavano in una situazione di ascolto della storia. Le storie, che scelgo ancora oggi, erano storie scritte principalmente da illustratori, perché dovevano essere più illustrate che scritte, e non seguivo le fasce d'età a cui il libro era rivolto, perché a volte le storie dei libri adatti a fasce d'età inferiori sono talmente belle e ben illustrate che possono essere apprezzate anche da bambini più grandi, variando o tarando il linguaggio utilizzato. C'era un linguaggio verbale e un linguaggio non verbale, del corpo, e c'era anche un'interazione con i bambini, per cui a volte i libri venivano letti stando seduti, altre volte in piedi facendo quello che il libro dice, rendendola una lettura autenticamente animata.

Si terminava l'incontro con il saluto finale, anch'esso ripetuto ogni volta perché dava sicurezza e perché piaceva, ma questo non significava che, il canto d'accoglienza e di saluto finale, dovessero essere gli stessi ogni volta. Il motivo è che i bambini (e questa è stata la prima cosa che ho notato nel corso degli anni) si stancano di fare stesse cose; hanno, da un lato, bisogno di certezze grazie alla routine ma, allo stesso tempo, hanno sempre più bisogno di input nuovi. E quindi glieli ho dati.

4 Quali erano le attività più frequenti nelle tue lezioni? Come scegli le attività? Alcune attività piacevano più di altre?

I giochi che piacevano di meno erano quelli in cui c'era troppa competizione, anche se era una sana competizione agli occhi dell'adulto, quindi andava tarato, modificato facendolo diventare "a coppie, a piccolo gruppo", puntando il più possibile al cooperative learning, nonostante non ci fossero dei conflitti di gruppo. Un aspetto che è cambiato negli anni era che alcuni bambini non amavano il punto massimo di energia e avevano bisogno che si fermasse prima; era fondamentale far durare il momento "energy" il giusto e farlo seguire sempre da un momento di "slow down". Questo richiedeva un'incredibile

capacità di osservazione individuale mentre si gioca con loro, perché a volte, in quanto educatore, non ci si rende conto che forse uno di quei bambini che sembrava più preso in realtà sta andando un po' in crisi.

Un gioco classico molto amato era "un due tre, stella". Solitamente veniva fatto con il tema degli animali, in modo da poter introdurre non soltanto il nome dell'animale ma anche la sua azione. Per parlare non bastano soltanto delle parole che poi mettiamo insieme; servono azioni, aggettivi, avverbi, espressioni. Un altro obiettivo dell'insegnante una lingua è quello di trasmettere una ricchezza di linguaggio. Questo gioco mi permetteva di far drammatizzare i bambini e farli concentrare sull'espressività facciale e del corpo, connettendola al linguaggio verbale e realizzando quindi l'efficacia dell'acquisizione linguistica del TPR. Questo si ricollega a quello che ti dicevo all'inizio, al "tutto e subito"; quando chiedevo loro di fare i leoni, la maggior parte semplicemente mimava in modo superficiale, o ruggiva solo. Perciò dovevo ricordare loro che se siamo dei leoni siamo a quattro zampe, apriamo la bocca e sbadigliamo, abbiamo dei denti grandi, degli artigli, ecc.". Quindi "un due tre, stella" mi ha permesso di farli tornare al gusto del gioco simbolico. Era ancora gioco autentico perché erano tutti insieme e molto spesso si divertivano anche solo perché correvano fra di loro, si muovevano tra di loro.

Un altro gioco che piaceva molto era il gioco legato all'espressività corporea attraverso la musica, per esempio giochi di "music stop & go". Non c'era un'indicazione guidata di ballo, ma era veramente un'espressività, un tenere il ritmo, un seguire la musica che aveva un'importante valenza educativa. Come educatori non potevamo dare per scontato che i bambini ascoltassero la musica mentre facevano un gioco musicale, perché di solito erano più attratti dalla sfida del gioco. Erano molto importante far cominciare la gara solo quando i bambini erano veramente connessi con l'ascolto. Quando usavo i dispositivi per far sentire la musica, facevo sentire ai bambini le vibrazioni sulla cassa. Quando i bambini erano veramente connessi, apprezzavano ogni variante di questo gioco, per esempio muoversi in modo strano, come un mostro, o mimare un animale mentre c'era la musica.

Giochi che mi permettevano di dare loro un livello erano interessanti per i bambini e anche per gli educatori. Non mi interessava il livello cognitivo, di miglioramento linguistico, ma mi concentravo su attività che mi consentissero di aggiungere diversi livelli o traguardi durante il gioco, che di conseguenza tenevano alto l'interesse e la motivazione.

Un esempio di gioco "slow down" che piaceva tantissimo era il gioco di concentrazione "guess which one is missing"; con un telo si coprono due o tre elementi e poi si fanno sparire e i bambini devono indovinare quale di quegli elementi è sparito. Quel gioco lo farebbero all'infinito. In quel momento erano seduti, assolutamente connessi con le orecchie, con il corpo e con gli occhi; questo gioco era il modo migliore, senza che se ne accorgessero, di farli concentrare. Ecco, la frase chiave è "senza che se ne accorgano", perché è fondamentale condurli in modo naturale verso gli obiettivi. L'insegnante deve ovviamente avere degli obiettivi, ma i bambini non si devono accorgere che ci sono. Questi obiettivi devono essere sempre più trasversali.

La storia piaceva moltissimo ma bisognava stare molto attenti ai tipi di storia, perché a volte c'erano storie meravigliose adatte per tutti che magari per un gruppo non funzionavano. Come insegnante, si è reso necessario guardare più attentamente i bambini e fare un'autovalutazione sulle modalità e sulle strategie di narrazione. Per esempio, raccontare una storia senza trasmettere emozioni, "con il pilota automatico", non lascia

traccia nonostante i bambini stiano ascoltando. Questa percezione sensoriale che loro hanno è da tenere in considerazione.

Ti faccio un esempio di gioco che non funzionava (con i bambini della materna): il classico "strega comanda color", che a loro piaceva molto in realtà in italiano, ma se sentivano dall'insegnante esperta d'inglese la richiesta di andare a toccare il colore erano capaci di, come diceva uno psicoterapeuta, "sentire la puzza della scuola pur non avendo ancora avuto a che fare con la scuola". Ecco perché bisognava "ingannarli" senza che se ne accorgessero, magari aggiungendo qualcosa, per es. raggiungere il colore in una maniera buffa, sfruttando il movimento corporeo. In realtà il gioco "strega comanda color", almeno per quanto mi riguarda, non lo facevo per sapere se sapessero o no i colori, ma era un gioco che li faceva concentrare, connettere, perché dovevano ascoltare per poter giocare e quindi imparare. Se non erano connessi, presenti mentalmente oltre che fisicamente, in quel momento, non si poteva fare un gioco più complicato, con qualche regola in più.

Il gioco della foresta, per esempio, mi permetteva di catturare la loro attenzione su di me che stavo guidando il gioco e sul gioco stesso. In questo gioco l'insegnante è un albero e siccome l'albero ha le radici non si può muovere, però col vento ondeggia e i suoi rami, le braccia, riescono a catturare i bambini che invece sono tutti animaletti. Di solito sceglievo lo stesso animale per tutti così si muovevano nella stessa maniera, perché era anche importante non dare troppi input diversificati tutti insieme. Quindi, se erano tutti coniglietti, dovevano saltellare, non correre, e quando io mi allungavo e ne toccavo uno, il coniglietto diventava un altro albero, finché non diventavamo una foresta e i vincitori erano quei pochi coniglietti che non si erano fatti prendere. Questo gioco piaceva molto ma, se non c'era attenzione, capire queste due semplici regole in un'altra lingua non era così facile.

Un altro gioco che piaceva molto era "Simon says", che a me non piaceva, mi sembrava un gioco didattico, e invece i bambini lo amavano e perciò lo facevo. Magari con i più piccoli facevo soltanto l'azione e loro la copiavano, poi io non la facevo più e chi non faceva l'azione era eliminato. Facevamo poi il level 2, che era l'originale; se "Simon says" non veniva detto, allora l'azione non andava copiata. Per farlo più mio ho sostituito Simon (perché Simon non sappiamo chi è) con un pupazzo concreto, uno stratagemma mediatore, che mi sussurrava le azioni da fare, però se io non dicevo (facciamo che si chiamava Oscar) "Oscar says", Oscar non l'ha detto quindi è eliminazione.

5 Abbiamo parlato delle attività che piacciono di più ai bambini. Preferivi fare attività che sai che ai bambini piacciono, nonostante non piacessero a te, piuttosto che proporre attività che piacevano a te ma non ai bambini?

All'inizio è chiaro che mi facevo catturare dalle attività che mi piacevano e le provavo con i bambini, ma il percorso si è invertito immediatamente. Considera che, all'inizio, la ricerca dei giochi era una cosa quasi enciclopedica; i miei primi incontri e laboratori erano uno sperimentare, quasi ogni volta, una cosa diversa. Non davo continuità alle attività perché volevo prima conoscere i bambini e testare l'approccio che stavo sviluppando. Questa è stata un'altra grande sfida. Direi che proporre i giochi che a loro piacevano molto era un modo per cominciare bene l'incontro e vivere serenamente quel momento come esperta. Guardando le reazioni e le emozioni dei bambini, imparo a conoscerli sempre meglio.

Fare conversazione durante l'attività di "slow down" era un momento speciale sia per i bambini, che erano liberi di esprimersi verbalmente ("mi è piaciuto", "ti voglio bene" per dire "mi piace questa cosa che hai fatto, io ci sto, io mi fido di te") sia per quelli che non se la sentivano di parlare ma usavano il linguaggio del corpo per mettersi in contatto con l'insegnante (ti abbraccia, ti chiede di essere aiutato).

6 Prima mi hai detto che l'insegnante deve avere degli obiettivi, meno didattici e sempre più trasversali. Quali sono gli obiettivi educativi e didattico-linguistici che fissi? Attraverso quali attività li consegui?

È importante fissare obiettivi di apprendimento che siano adatti alle situazioni vissute dalle fasce d'età a cui mi rivolgo e basati sulle loro passioni, sui loro interessi, e che abbiano come punto focale un autentico uso della lingua. Come ho già detto, la frase chiave è "senza che [i bambini] se ne accorgano", che è fondamentale per condurli in modo naturale verso gli obiettivi.

Gli obiettivi linguistici sono presenti, ma sono più trasversali, perché legati a un libro. Per es., un libro non parla solo dei colori, o dei numeri ecc., non è diviso in unità didattiche. Per me un libro deve raccontare una storia, e no dire "questa è una mucca, questo è il colore rosso"; questo è un libro "le mie prime parole", e non è quello che scelgo di leggere ai bambini. Io scelgo libri che abbiano una storia che stimoli la fantasia, l'immaginazione e la creatività (e non libri che ricordino le regole, i comportamenti corretti dei bambini), che raccontino qualcosa di attraente per i bambini e che sia divertente. Lo storytelling è uno strumento che permette di trasmettere l'autenticità della lingua, con le sue espressioni del parlato, le emozioni, ed è anche il mezzo attraverso cui stimolare la curiosità verso ciò che non si conosce, che non è "familiare", ovvero l'aspetto culturale della lingua, in modo creativo.

Usando diversi metodi di insegnamento e apprendimento, e non uno unico, consento ai bambini a sfruttare ogni tipo di intelligenza (Gardner) in loro possesso. Il TPR permette loro di sfruttare a pieno tutto il corpo e anche i 5 sensi nell'apprendimento attivo della lingua, attraverso l'esplorazione della realtà che li circonda; la musica, intesa come canto ed espressività corporea seguendo la musica, stimola la produzione linguistica attiva dei bambini; la manualità, intesa come veicolo preferenziale per trasmettere la lingua in modo autentico; il gioco, infine, come filo conduttore di qualsiasi attività volta a far apprendere nel modo più spontaneo ed attivo possibile la lingua, divertendosi.

7 Quali sono stati i maggiori cambiamenti a causa del lockdown/pandemia nei metodi, nei tipi di attività proposti e nel modo in cui vengono svolte le attività?

Per quanto riguarda i metodi durante la pandemia, bisogna fare una piccola digressione su quelli che sono stati i metodi durante il lockdown, insegnare dietro allo schermo e non in presenza. La struttura della lezione che ti avevo spiegato ha perso alcuni punti fondamentali, per esempio il rito di inizio e il rito di fine che sono stati sostituiti (perché io ho visto essere necessario ciò) con un momento di conversazione in lingua italiana, quindi non in English full immersion.

Dopodiché, l'altro cambiamento durante il lockdown, dell'insegnamento dietro a uno schermo, è stato quello di usare la musica abbinando anche dei video che fossero fatti bene, il che significa brevi, con immagini chiare (un po' gli stessi criteri che uso per i libri), e che comunicassero qualcosa, che trasmettessero delle emozioni oltre che una storia. Questi video mi sono serviti anche come regalo ai bambini, come legame fra me e

loro. Non ho mai dato compiti a casa, ma questi video (ovviamente quelli che li avevano entusiasmati) diventavano il filo che ci legava; non c'era un rapporto fisico ma c'era il "regalo di Marcella", le "pillole d'inglese" di Marcella. Questo ha avuto effetto fortissimo perché, mentre prima tutto il materiale didattico (musica, canzoni, libri ecc) rimanevano nella sezione, nella classe, ora queste risorse didattiche uscivano da questi luoghi ed entravano nelle case dei bambini, e quindi potevano essere visti più e più volte. La ripetizione come richiesta passiva non porta a nulla, ma il riguardare perché ti piace qualcosa porta addirittura all'apprendimento; se tu riascolti una canzone, la canti, la balli più e più volte, stai imparando senza accorgertene.

Un'altra cosa che ho dovuto cambiare durante il lockdown è stato il racconto delle storie, perché era piuttosto complesso leggerle con il libro rivolto verso la webcam; a volte ho usato video fatti bene che mostrassero il libro sfogliato da qualcun altro, inquadrato dall'alto. Ma siccome mi dispiaceva molto non avere il libro fra le mani, ho utilizzato la tecnologia per creare racconti di libri dove ogni tanto comparivano le immagini delle pagine e ogni tanto c'erano dei "props", quasi dei giochi teatrali fatti con lo schermo. Attraverso la telecamera, far spuntare improvvisamente da un inaspettato un puppet, un sonaglio o altro era la cosa più divertente, soprattutto per i bimbi di fascia 5-7 anni, perché era una sorpresa, faceva ridere, era un po' come un'animazione di un cartone animato ma fatta dal vivo.

Per quanto riguarda sempre l'insegnamento dietro allo schermo, il movimento, la parte fisica, motoria, del corpo, non poteva mancare, anzi è stata fondamentale; i bambini dovevano collegarsi in uno spazio che fosse (ovviamente in base a ciò che avevano) libero da sedie, tavoli, e quant'altro per potersi muovere (questa era l'unica condizione che avevo richiesto), ed è stata la differenza fondamentale rispetto alla scuola che, invece, ha chiesto loro di essere collegati seduti come se fossero a scuola, ma "come se fossero" per un bambino non funziona. Il bambino richiede un effetto positivo, un godimento di ciò che fa. Stare seduti a scuola, per quanto possa essere faticoso ecc., è meno stancante perché c'è una relazione continua, con la maestra, con i compagni, che fa dimenticare di essere seduti, e questa relazione è la parte della socialità. Dietro a uno schermo stare seduti è veramente una tortura per un bambino di qualunque età.

Invece io ho potuto farli ballare, ho potuto fare tutti i giochi di "music stop & go", addirittura ho fatto partire moltissime "cacce al tesoro" di vario tipo; per esempio, dovevano correre a cercare un oggetto che chiedevo di trovare, o (se non riuscivano a trovarlo) dovevano disegnarlo, e dovevano essere rapidissimi perché il primo che arrivava con l'oggetto vinceva. Questo gioco univa sia movimento, sia esplorazione della propria casa, sia capacità di osservare ambienti ben noti che magari prima nella fretta non si osservavano.

Non è stato assente nemmeno il laboratorio manuale. Certamente non è stato facile perché, mentre l'insegnante fa, deve contemporaneamente inquadrare cosa sta facendo, e bisogna avere l'attrezzatura giusta che permetta anche di muoversi, ma con quello che avevamo ce l'abbiamo fatta. Abbiamo affrontato anche un aspetto educativo, che è l'ansia da prestazione che hanno i bambini; il fatto di essere distanti poteva farla crescere ai massimi livelli. La mia impostazione di tutti i laboratori manuali svolti aveva lo scopo di valorizzare la relazione, prendendosi un momento per stare insieme, e di valorizzare qualunque cosa sarebbe venuta fuori, nonostante fossero comunque laboratori guidati.

Simile a queste cose è far merenda insieme; siccome molti gruppi erano nella fascia oraria della merenda e si collegavano che avevano ancora la bocca piena di cibo (normalmente dal vivo la facevano fuori e poi entravano una volta finito), ho deciso di

farla insieme, tanto quei dieci minuti non penalizzavano la lezione, ma al contrario erano stimoli per nuove espressioni, domande, in un'altra lingua.

Quando siamo passati dallo schermo di nuovo in presenza, ci sono stati per forza di cose altri cambiamenti; tutte le cose che ho imparato a fare, a creare, durante il lockdown, quando non eravamo in presenza, mi hanno fatto capire di che cosa avessero bisogno i bambini, e non avevo altra scelta se non di cambiare nuovamente, ed è stato anche molto stressante. È cambiato l'approccio, oltre all'approccio umanistico-affettivo uso anche l'outdoor education, dove non solo le lezioni vengono fatte fuori, all'aria aperta ma si rispetta l'approccio con tutti i suoi elementi. Da maggio 2021, momento in cui sono ritornata nelle scuole, ho realizzato progetti di outdoor education in lingua inglese. È stato in questo momento che ho eliminato il dialogo in italiano. Non è stato un passaggio costretto ma piuttosto naturale, in quanto l'approccio di outdoor education apre la possibilità ad attività di tipo esperienziale quindi l'utilizzo di una lingua facendo è assolutamente naturale.

Per quel che riguarda la routine, la parte di accoglienza iniziale e i saluti finali sono diventati man mano sempre meno strutturati. Ad esempio, la canzone dei nomi inventata da me dove, invece di chiedere direttamente al bambino come si chiama, chiedo agli altri bambini di aiutarmi a sapere come si chiama quel bambino, viene richiesta dai bambini non tanto perché si ripetono i nomi, ma perché ad ogni nome viene associata un'azione (e questo li fa muovere, divertire) ed è diventato un gioco, per cui le volte successive sono loro a proporre le azioni da fare per ogni nome. Questo sposta l'attenzione dal singolo bambino al gruppo intero, e crea la collaborazione fra di loro. L'input che dà questa canzone è autentico perché io non parlo in italiano ma parlo solo in inglese, e ho veramente bisogno di sapere come si chiamano i bambini dopo che io mi sono presentata. Questo gioco però non dura tanto, perché dopo i primi tre incontri ovviamente io mi ricordo i nomi e il gioco ha già perso la sua efficacia. Quella canzone, nel momento in cui i bambini non l'hanno più chiesta, io non l'ho più ripresentata. In sostituzione di quella ho inserito altre attività, per esempio il riscaldamento corporeo (se ad esempio era una giornata molto fredda) oppure direttamente un gioco.

Un altro cambiamento è che la musica non è più trasmessa da "devices", una specie di rifiuto di tutto quello che è tecnologia (anche se io adoro la tecnologia e secondo me non è da escludere nel percorso di sviluppo dei bambini, fa parte della loro vita). Però, subito dopo i mesi di chiusura in casa, era necessario disintossicarsi, ritornare un po' alle origini. La musica si fa sicuramente con la voce, ma anche attraverso gli strumenti, e per questo ho introdotto la chitarra; la musica che si canta nei miei incontri ora è solo ed esclusivamente quella che suono e canto, e che i bambini cantano con me. Ho visto una maggiore produzione linguistica rispetto a quando trasmettevo la musica tramite devices (telefono, cassa, youtube…). La musica dal vivo stimola qualsiasi età, anche le fasce piccolissime dei 3-4 anni.

Un altro cambiamento sui metodi è stato rendersi conto dell'importanza di fare esperienza; quindi, non più solo ed esclusivamente un gioco in sé per sé, ma giochi che siano esperienze, esplorazione. Le attività che sono rimaste sono sicuramente lo storytelling, la musica ma semplicemente dal vivo, e i giochi, soprattutto quei giochi che permettono di muoversi, di esplorare, di usare il corpo.

Per quanto riguarda lo storytelling, è sempre stato legato al tema che si affrontava. Era realizzato in modo animato, ovvero con molta drammatizzazione da parte dell'insegnante che leggeva la storia ma anche molto coinvolgimento dei bambini, chiamati dalla storia a partecipare. Da maggio 2021, le storie sono raccontate esattamente nello stesso modo; il

plus è la possibilità di muoversi in modo più libero rispetto a un locale al chiuso e la possibilità di toccare con mano, e con il 5 sensi, tutto ciò che ci circonda. Essenzialmente è rimasto tale quale; l'unica cosa che è cambiata è che lo storytelling non è più così vincolato al tema come lo era prima.

Come lo storytelling, il laboratorio manuale è un modo per portare avanti una tematica in modo da utilizzare non solo il TPR (Total Physical Response) come strategia, ma anche lo stimolo della creatività e del senso del tatto, della manualità pura. Essendo gli incontri all'aria aperta, si sono aperte molte possibilità di lavoro con le mani, a partire dallo scavare insieme per trovare bruchi o antichi fossili, durante il gioco libero, o per creare una strada dove far correre delle immaginarie macchine che vengono rappresentate da elementi naturali. Dall'altro lato ci può essere invece un laboratorio manuale guidato, anch'esso stimolato dall'osservazione del mondo esterno. Un esempio è il braccialetto naturale, una fascetta di carta dove, durante una passeggiata o un gioco di caccia al tesoro, ciascun bambino può raccogliere ciò che lo attira di più, anche il terreno, e usarlo per creare il proprio braccialetto. Il bracciale naturale è proprio l'esempio classico di che cosa non è un lavoretto; esso non viene creato per essere portato a casa, essere conservato, ma è un'esperienza che inizia e finisce lì. Tant'è vero che, dopo averlo creato, si gioca col bracciale usando la fantasia, per esempio dicendo che è un bracciale magico che fa fare cose magiche, versi di animali, movimenti strani, e sono i bambini, dopo il primo esempio, a voler muovere il bracciale e farlo agire, e a proporre in che cosa ci trasforma. Il bracciale entro la giornata sicuramente è andato rotto o perso, però ha realizzato la funzione principale del lavoro (e non del lavoretto), cioè di utilizzare le mani per creare, lasciandosi stimolare da più elementi, e da lì addirittura volare con alla fantasia, trasformandolo in un gioco. Altri laboratori che si possono realizzare sono quelli dove si guidano i bambini ad utilizzare sia il materiale naturale che quello non naturale. Perché questo? Perché la mescolanza è un ulteriore stimolo a non rimanere rigidi nel contesto in cui si è ma ad aprirsi, a trovare possibilità ulteriori. Il laboratorio, ora, non è legato ad un tema, è invece legato ai bambini stessi e alle loro osservazioni.

Per quel che riguarda i saluti finali, già da prima della pandemia avevo smesso di cantare la canzone che salutava perché avevo visto che i bambini non erano così entusiasti, erano più contenti di cantare la canzone di inizio che è quella di fine, non so il motivo, e non credo fosse legato alla tipologia di musica e altro e quindi piano piano io o la canticchiavo velocemente mentre ci rivestivamo oppure non la cantavo proprio. Oggi utilizzo di più "bans", dove uno dice una frase e l'altro ripete, a botta e risposta, e di solito sono in rima e con un ritmo tenuto magari con i piedi o con le mani, come "attention grabber" su quelle frasi, su quella comunicazione concreta di saluto (per esempio "it's time to go, see you next time!").

7b Parliamo ora del planning delle lezioni (lesson plan). Quando e come pianifichi le lezioni? E invece quando eravamo in DAD come funzionava il planning?

Durante la pandemia ne facevo di nuovi. Durante i mesi di lockdown, di non presenza, partivo quasi da…. a volte anche da una canzone che mi piaceva perché aveva dei movimenti belli, e ci legavo un gioco. Quindi facevo il contrario: partivo da una risorsa didattica, per esempio un bel video che faceva vedere luoghi, animali poco conosciuti, e da lì poi partivamo col gioco. Partivo da una risorsa che potesse catturare la loro attenzione e motivazione. A volte non riuscivo a finire quello che avevo previsto perché il video aveva stimolato tante riflessioni, osservazioni.

Possiamo dire che il lesson plan viene creato dopo l'incontro. Finito l'incontro raggruppo le attività, perché parto dai bambini, da quello che vogliono fare. Quello che intendo dire è che c'è una strutturazione più fluida dell'incontro. Non è detto che ci sia sempre la stessa canzone all'inizio, le attività non sono sempre guidate, ma nascono dal gioco libero nel quale io partecipo chiedendo di poter giocar, ovvero lasciando anche quella libertà ai bambini di condividere o meno il proprio spazio di gioco con me. Eppure, quando lascio questa libertà, la maggior parte si aspetta che io invece porti loro qualcosa (un nuovo gioco, una sfida, una sorpresa che esce da borse o valigie…) e certe volte me lo chiedono esplicitamente: "cosa facciamo oggi, dada?" "Let's play!" (indicando la zona giochi del giardino) "Ma tu vai a casa?" "No, I'll stay with you. Can I play with you?" "Gioca con noi!". È grazie al rapporto di fiducia e di frequenza che questa richiesta cade, e quindi o sono loro a proporti dei giochi oppure, stando proprio fisicamente insieme, di fronte a quello che si sta facendo, a far venire fuori le mie proposte in modo naturale, e, sempre in modo naturale e spontaneo, queste proposte vengono accolte o non accolte dai bambini.

8 Qual è stata la risposta dei ragazzi ai cambiamenti (anche per quanto riguarda motivazione, attenzione, partecipazione, gradimento delle attività)?

Durante il lockdown, come ho già detto, non c'era più una routine ben definita, però, per esempio, il gioco della caccia al tesoro me lo chiedevano sempre; perciò, si può dire, che quasi quasi la routine l'hanno innescata loro, loro hanno deciso che un giorno per quel gioco ci doveva essere. Presentavo attività molto diverse tra loro, ma che avevano come denominatore comune un tema.

Devo dire che ho escluso dalle lezioni online tutti i bimbi tra i 3 e i 5 anni e mi sono concentrata sulla primaria e le medie, anche perché ero già molto impegnata a modificare e adattare strategie, metodi e giochi. Per esempio, ho creato molti powerpoint per la primaria, che non erano di ascolto passivo, ma avevano un'immagine, poi un gioco, per esempio di dadi, e infine un board game dove il "board" era lo schermo. La reazione dei ragazzi all'incontro online è stata di grande sorpresa e coinvolgimento, anche perché l'esperienza della D.A.D. era stata generalmente molto scadente: poco coinvolgimento dei bambini, spiegazioni frontali, poco tempo lasciato all'espressione di sé e delle proprie emozioni. I loro feedback sono sempre stati positivi, segno di grande coinvolgimento e desiderio di ricollegarsi ogni volta.

Tornare a scuola (dell'infanzia) dopo il lockdown è stato molto diverso sia per me che per i bambini. Sono tanti gli aspetti che sono cambiati. Prima di tutto, il luogo in cui ci si incontra è il giardino e non più il salone della scuola, le attività sono diventate meno numerose, ma più esplorative, di movimento e con maggior disponibilità di tempo. La mia presenza è tornata ad essere totalmente in English full-immersion e le risorse che presento loro sono essenziali; non più valigie piene di input, props e altro, ma con uno o al massimo due elementi funzionali al gioco (per es. una palla, dei contenitori, delle tempere, un libro, o altro). Infine, una presenza fissa, la chitarra.

Quando li osservo, vedo bambini più centrati sul presente, che non hanno bisogno di uscire dalla realtà che stanno vivendo in quel momento, ma vedo bambini curiosi che mi chiedono di ripetere quel gioco o attività che stiamo facendo insieme e che non hanno bisogno di mettersi al centro dell'attenzione per esser guardati. Questo avviene per la naturalezza con cui si svolgono le attività, per il rispetto dei tempi di ogni bambino.

Dal punto di vista dell'attenzione, i momenti in cerchio non sono più appesantiti dai richiami continui a guardare chi parla, ma sono momenti divertenti di gioco, diventando

un'ulteriore occasione per provare a dire qualche parola in inglese. Le transizioni, i difficili passaggi da un'attività all'altra, sono diventate anch'esse momenti quasi di gioco, dove i bambini interagiscono con brevi frasi in inglese; basti pensare all'esortazione "Let's go!", oppure "Circle, let's make a circle" da loro ripetuta perfettamente e correttamente nella situazione.

Infine, la musica cantata e suonata dal vivo è un propulsore che porta davvero tutti (sono pochissime le eccezioni) a cantare e, così facendo, a sentire la propria voce che usa suoni diversi senza però esserne spaventati. La conferma è che in sezione i bambini cantano a squarciagola pezzi interi di canzoni imparate con me. Questa produzione linguistica spontanea e naturale mancava da alcuni anni nei miei progetti pur essendo i bambini sempre felici e coinvolti nelle attività che proponevo.

APPENDIX C

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

Image 4

Image 5

Image 6

Image 7

Image 8

Image 9