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Using Storytelling in the Primary  
EFL Classroom:  
A Pilot Project to Promote Motivation

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## Abstract

Storytelling is one of the oldest and most effective tools humans use to pass on knowledge, preserve culture and inspire moral values. In its earliest forms, storytelling was mainly oral, and it was used to better understand the world we inhabit. However, as storytelling developed over time, we can now distinguish between four main varieties of it: oral, visual, written, and digital. Nowadays, storytelling is also used in classrooms as a motivational tool. This thesis aims to describe a storytelling pilot project and a series of related activities that have been presented to a class of 13 seven-year-old pupils of a primary school in the province of Venice (Italy) in order to positively influence their motivation. These students, who study English as a foreign language, come from different parts of the world (Italy, Peru, Albania, Ukraine, and Moldavia) and have different L1 backgrounds. Some of them have behavioural problems, while others have been diagnosed with autism. This project focuses on the possible effects of storytelling on children's motivation, and it also intends to promote the inclusive participation of all students, including those with special needs.

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## **Introduction**

Interest, desire, excitement, ambition, and attraction serve as synonymous constructs denoting a pivotal determinant contributing to the attainment of proficiency in foreign language acquisition: motivation. Researchers including Lambert, Gardner, Deci and Ryan, Dörnyei, as well as Titone and Balboni within the Italian context, have endeavoured to furnish comprehensive definitions of motivation, each spotlighting distinct facets of this multifaceted phenomenon. These facets encompass one's disposition towards the act of learning, personal interests, and proclivities, along with contextual influences originating from familial, peer, and pedagogical interactions, and the overarching learning milieu.

Unlike their adult counterparts, young language learners evince a diminished inclination towards instrumental motivations. They are not confronted with the exigency of securing employment or pursuing higher education. Conversely, intrinsic motivation may not manifest as prominently among them, given the relative vagueness of their self-awareness, which is still developing. In light of this, the motivation of young language learners is substantially contingent upon various factors, including the nature of instructional activities and the influential roles played by educators, parents, and peers.

Throughout our educational journeys, we have all encountered instances of both motivation and frustration within the learning process. The primary objective of this project, led by the author of this thesis who is also the teacher in the class, was to cultivate an inclusive and serene learning environment by augmenting the motivation levels of the students. The overarching aspiration of this initiative was twofold: firstly, to contribute to the creation of positive and enduring memories that will shape their future academic endeavours, and secondly, to equip them with the tools necessary for exploring their intrinsic motivation, individual interests, and passions. Central to the ethos of this project was the aspiration to ensure that each student within the classroom felt valued and esteemed, a sentiment underscored by the recognition of the significance of their contributions.

The present study is situated within the context of an Italian primary school located in the northern region of the country, where English language instruction is mandatory, albeit limited to a few hours per week. This thesis strives to provide a resource, carefully tailored to serve the needs of educators, teachers, parents, and individuals who are interested in the cultivation of motivation and inspiration in children. Its overarching goal is to offer a comprehensive toolset that assists in fostering enthusiasm and encouraging personal growth and development among young learners. This undertaking acknowledges the intricate interplay between adult and child motivation within the educational milieu, while also acknowledging that the motivation of the latter frequently emulates that of the former. Furthermore, it underscores the principle that educational programming should prioritize children, positioning them at the core of activity planning, as the educational system primarily serves their developmental needs.



# Chapter 1

## Motivation in Foreign Language Learning

This chapter will focus on motivation and its relevance in language learning. Being the topic so vast, motivation is still a matter of debate. Thus, this chapter does not aim to give a single definition of it, but it wants to present different models and theories regarding motivation in the language learning acquisition process.

Motivation has been the subject of numerous research studies carried out by experts in the field of psycholinguistic, cognitive psychology and language teaching methodology such as Lambert, Gardner, Deci and Ryan, Dörnyei, and, in the Italian context, Titone and Balboni. The theories that will be summarized and reported below will offer an overview of the subject and help understand the use of the term motivation in the following chapters.

### 1.1. Motivation in FL learning

Motivation offers a wide range of possible definitions. Notwithstanding this, there is no doubt on the etymology of the word: motivation derives from the verb “to move”, and so it can be interpreted as what “moves” a person, what a person desires, wants and what he needs to take action, to reach his goal. This last question is at the heart of research on motivation. Investigations into motivation within the context of foreign language acquisition (henceforth referred to as FL) and second language acquisition (hereinafter L2) were inaugurated in Canada during the latter half of the 1950s. Two Canadian psychologists, Gardner and Lambert, opened were among the first scholars who contributed to the field with their research. Gardner and Lambert took as sample a group of 75 high school students, studying French as a L2, in Montreal. The students were given a test battery that included questions to reveal indices of motivational intensity and orientation of their motivation. The testing instrument developed by Gardner is composed by the “Orientation Index”, an indicator that helps classifying students’ purposes in either “integrative” or “instrumental”, and the “Motivational Intensity Scale”, the instrument they used to measure the amount of effort and enthusiasm that students show. The students were given a test to measure their linguistic aptitude, their verbal intelligence, and various attitudinal and motivational characteristics. The aim of the test was to demonstrate the correlation between these factors and the foreign language learning process. Gardner and Lambert (1959) report the “Orientation Index” that classifies individual language learning goals in two different ways. The OI consisted in providing the students with four alternative reasons

for a person to study French and the students were asked to rank them as to their personal relevance. The alternatives were:

- 1- be useful to obtain a job;
- 2- be helpful in understanding the French-Canadian people and their way of life;
- 3- permit meeting and conversing with more and varied people;
- 4- make one a better-educated person.

Alternatives 2 and 3 are considered as indicator of “integrative motivation”, where the aim in the language study is to learn more about the language, and/or learn the language to meet more people from different cultures and backgrounds; while alternatives 1 and 4 are considered as indicator of “instrumental motivation”, where the aim is more practical and relies on the utilitarian value of linguistic achievement.

The Motivational-intensity scale, on the other hand, consisted in eight multiple choice statements that were designed to measure the intensity of motivation including work done for the assignments, opportunities taken to improve the language skills, future intentions to study the language or to make use of the language, and importance attributed to the language. For each field, the students needed to choose the alternative that more suited them.

Gardner and Lambert’s research was designed to determine the comparative importance of linguistic aptitude and certain motivational variables in L2 learning. They found that not only the mere linguistic aptitude of a student is to be associated with his or her achievements in the process of second learning acquisition, but that motivational factors play a role too. Gardner and Lambert (1959) also pointed out a remarkable positive correlation between the “Orientation Index” and the achievements in the second language, suggesting that students with an integratively-oriented type of motivation are generally more successful in acquiring French than those who have an instrumentally oriented motivation. Gardner’s testing instrument has encouraged numerous empirical studies which, once synthesized, resulted in the Socio-educational model.

From this theory of “integrative motivation” and “instrumental motivation” evolved, in the 1970s, one of the most well-known theories regarding the different orientations of motivation: the Self-determination theory (SDT). Deci, expert in psychology and social sciences, and Ryan, expert in positive psychology and education are well known in psychology for their theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The meaning of these two terms is similar to Lambert and Gardner’s “integrative motivation” and “instrumental motivation” but, differently from them,



they have not to be seen as a dichotomy, as they both contribute to the SDT in a continuum. According to Deci and Ryan, SDT presupposes the presence of three basic innate psychological needs to be satisfied, whether the individuals consciously valued them or not. (Deci and Ryan, 2000):

1. The need of autonomy, which refers to people's desire to determine their behaviour and take responsibility for consequential outcomes.
2. The need of relatedness, which refers to the desire to feel connected to others and their community (to care and to be cared, to be respected etc.).
3. The need of competence, defined as individuals' inherent desire to feel effective in interacting with the environment.

In language learning, for example in the English learning context, the three psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are generally interpreted as follows: Autonomy need includes learners' needs to choose some aspects of English classes and learning. Need for competence is the students' desire to understand and to be understood when communicating in English, and the desire to successfully complete tasks in English (or another target language). Relatedness need is wanting to connect with other classmates and the teacher, having a sense of unity, and being liked and respected (Dörnyei, 2001).

The importance of SDT theory resides in the idea that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation work together. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), the two types of motivation are not to be seen as in contrast or as a dualism, since in SDT motivation resides along a continuum where, at one end, stands intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation stands in the middle, and amotivation stands at the other end as Figure 1 shows.

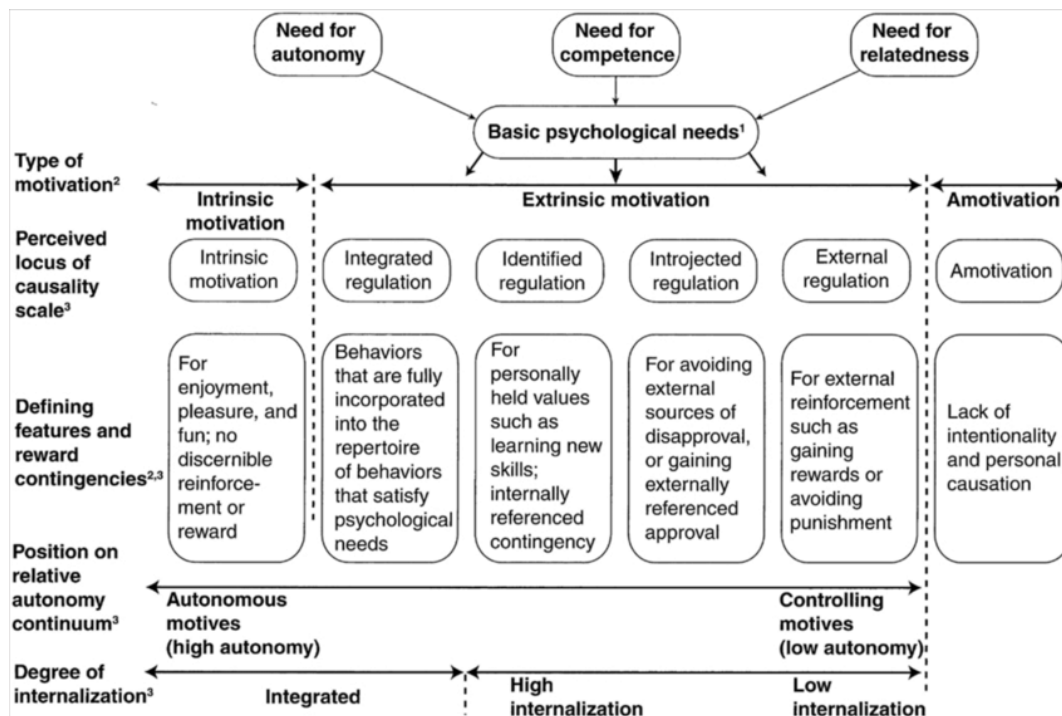


Figure 1. *Self-Determination Theory* (Adapted from Ryan & Deci, 2000)

If we see motivation as the desire to do something, we can define intrinsic motivation as the one that derives from interest in the activity, from doing something just because it is pleasing and satisfying. For Deci and Ryan (1980), intrinsic motivation provides the needed energy for decision making and for managing motives.

In extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, the source of motivation is external, meaning outside oneself, and so linked to instrumental ends and external reinforcement. It can be a positive reinforcement or a negative reinforcement. The positive one can result in social reinforcement (i.e. expressing verbal approval of a behaviour: “well done”, “good job”), natural reinforcement (i.e. a good grade), tangible reinforcement (i.e. a physical reward: a candy, a toy, 2 minutes of screentime), token reinforcers or other types of point-based systems, or a negative reinforcement (i.e. a punishment) so the student is moved to avoid the negative one. At the other end of SDT stands amotivation, so the absence of motivation which occurs when the subject cannot see a relation between his efforts and the results (as cited in Bier, 2013, 431). The more the individuals’ innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled, the more their behaviour is intrinsically motivated.

According to Titone (1991) attitude plays a role in language learning motivation, raising from interactions between the learner and the environment. Titone proposed a general model of learning that encompasses the so called “linguistic attitude”. This model consists in five steps:

1. Need perception, that originates from comparing the situation of the “organism” (the learner) with what the environment supply 2. Feeling of interest, toward a specific supply of the environment 3. Positive attitude 4. Intention 5. Decision of voluntary choice.

Titone considered attitude as a human response to the environment, it is an element that generates from the context, depends on the context, and can be modified in the process of learning. It is connected to motivation as it triggers interest, intention and will to learn. Talking about language acquisition, linguistic attitude is described as a cognitive-affective orientation towards a specific language and culture, that can work as motivation towards new goals. Stemming from the environment means that it is influenced by the school context, teachers, social factors such as cultural biases. This is important when talking about language learning because cultural clichés and ethnolinguistic conflicts are to be avoided in order not to undermine the learning process, while acceptance of different cultural patterns should rather be promoted. That’s why teachers also have an important role in influencing pupils’ attitude and affective orientation.

Balboni (1999, 67) notes that “[motivation] is a basic notion of psychodidactics: without motivation there is no acquisition and, often, not even learning”. According to his theory, Balboni presents his Triangular Model of motivation. This model, as its name suggests, divides motivation in 3 main categories (Balboni, 2014):

1- Duty-driven motivation: linked to traditional didactic environments. This type of motivation does not lead to acquisition because of the so-called *affective filter*<sup>1</sup>, or emotional barrier, that prevents the new notions to reach the long-term memory area of the brain.

2- Need-driven motivation: linked to the left part of the brain, which is considered the more logic hemisphere, this type of motivation is efficient if the student is conscious of his needs and it works until the student perceive the need. Once the need is considered satisfied, this type of motivation stops working.

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<sup>1</sup> The hypothesis of the affective filter, introduced by Stephen Krashen in relation to second language acquisition, states that the acquisition of a language is influenced by emotions and that negative emotions, related to embarrassment, frustration, or judgement, cause this filter to raise, to come “up”, preventing acquisition (Krashen, 1985)

3- Pleasure-driven motivation: this one is linked primarily to the right part of the brain, which is considered the hemisphere linked to creativity, imagination, and feelings.

According to Balboni, this type of motivation includes different origin of “pleasure”:

- pleasure of learning: considered a main source of pleasure, reversed by failure. The role of the teacher is quite important to avoid the feeling of failure, maintaining motivation. The teacher’s job here is to propose accessible inputs (Krashen, 1985) and to present mistakes as natural in the process of learning a language.
- pleasure of varying material, and exercises of linguistic production and comprehension avoiding boredom caused by repetitive materials.
- pleasure of novelty, of the unexpected, of the unusual, which is linked to the above-mentioned concept of variation.
- pleasure of the challenge
- pleasure of systematization (i.e. finding a grammar rule instead of being given one to learn)
- pleasure of responding to their sense of duty, being a good student. Not to be confused with duty-driven motivation, this type of pleasure resides in the self and can be influenced by a human element: the teacher, seen as a guide, as a person to be trusted as an expert and as a human.

Considering pleasure a positive sentiment, Balboni’s theory of pleasure is profoundly linked to feelings and emotions. Balboni (2013) describes emotions as adaptive responses of our minds to external inputs. Psychophysiological reactions aiming at surviving and adapting. In the language learning context, trigger factors of emotions (positive or negative) may be a language course, difficulty in communicating in the L2, pressures linked to globalization and the need to know the lingua franca etc.

According to Schumann (1997) every emotional stimulus that comes from the context, is processed by the brain for the purpose of repeating the positive feeling or preventing a negative one. The correlation between emotions and their influence on the language learning process has been object of several studies. What emerged is that not only emotions have an influence on motivation and language learning, but also that there is a strict correlation between teachers’ emotions and pupils’ emotions, either positive or negative:

since they are constantly interacting with each other, we cannot consider the emotional state of one group whilst ignoring the concerns of the other. The general outcome of the lesson depends on the quality of such interactions (Mousavi 2007, 33, cited in Bier 2013)

This further sustains Lazarus' interpretation of emotions that, similarly to Titone's idea of attitude, describes emotions as stemming from the interaction between the subject (his idea of self, his motivation etc.) and the context he is in (Lazarus, 1991).

From this perspective, teachers are to be considered part of the student's "context", as well as students are to be considered part of teachers' context.

According to a study conducted by Wild, Enzle and Hawkins (1992, cited in Bier 2013), and other studies that followed (Roth et al., 2007), if students perceive motivation in teachers, they feel motivated in return (and vice versa) showing more enthusiasm and engagement.

Reaffirming the relationship between emotions, motivation and learning process, Balboni notes

*Le emozioni influenzano la motivazione dell'insegnante, la sua gestione della classe, ma anche la sua capacità cognitiva, ad esempio nel classificare gli studenti e nel valutarne i risultati. (Balboni, 2013, 23)*

Numerous research endeavours have explored the emotional experiences of educators and the various factors that can exert an influence on their motivation. In their seminal work, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) delineated a compendium of five principal factors that bear upon the motivation, or demotivation, of teachers:

1. stress caused by inadequate pay, inadequate structure, bureaucracy, students' lack of interest;
2. limited autonomy caused by centralised control measures, supervisions and standard tests to monitor students progress, national reforms that they are not in agree with, but that they are forced to put in act;
3. insufficient efficacy caused by a feeling of inadequacy in classroom management and in handling the relationship with students, colleagues and families;
4. intellectual engagement: some teachers may find difficult to maintain their own motivation because of strict national curricula that limit teachers creativity and their need for novelty;

5. “futurelessness”: absence of further carrier chances<sup>2</sup>.

From this list of factors, it is clear that teachers’ emotions are influenced by the relationship with the students and his/her work inside the classroom, and by external factors related to colleagues, administration, families and institutions. According to Balboni (2013) it is not correct to distinguish emotions in a dichotomy of positive vs negative emotions, and he propose to use the Platonic model that includes Eros, Pathos and Epithymia. The latter, in the language learning/teaching context, means *desire*: desire to ideate something new, to try new technologies, to try new experience, desire and motivation to do your job with dedication and commitment (Balboni, 2013).

## **1.2. Motivational strategies**

As important as the definition of motivation are the strategies that teachers and learners can use to reach their goals. Dörnyei (1994) listed some of these strategies aiming to support teachers in their role. A great contribution to empirical research on motivational strategies (MotS) came from Dörnyei and Csizér (1998), who investigated how 116 English teachers in Hungary perceived some motivational macro-strategies (derived from those proposed by Dörnyei, 1994).

Cheng and Dörnyei (2007) conducted another study aiming to examine how a list of motivational strategies (derived from western educational contexts) was perceived by Taiwanese English teachers. The results of this study were compared with the results of the previous study conducted in Hungary, providing evidence that some motivational strategies are transferable and perceived as valid across different cultural and ethnolinguistic contexts – for instance: ‘displaying motivating teacher behaviour’, promoting learners’ self-confidence’, creating a pleasant classroom climate’ and presenting tasks properly’, while others, such as promoting learner autonomy, are culturally dependent. (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007)

Further confirmation can be extrapolated from a confrontation operated in Cucinotta (2020) on the perception of the importance of motivational strategies in foreign language classes (Fig 2).

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<sup>2</sup> In a research investigation carried out in Poland by Johnston (1997), involving a sample of 17 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors, it was observed that these educators did not possess an initial inclination towards teaching as their primary career choice; instead, teaching emerged as a secondary or fallback option for them. Furthermore, these teachers did not rule out the possibility of engaging in teaching for a limited duration in their professional lives, and their level of work engagement exhibited irregular patterns. It is important to note that due to the relatively small sample size, caution must be exercised in generalizing these findings. Nevertheless, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the initial motivations of teachers.

	You 2004	Deniz 2010	Ruesch et al. 2012	Alshehri, Etherington 2017	Yeo 2017	Wong, Wong 2017	Safdari 2018	Shousha 2018	Cucinotta in corso di stampa
<b>Comportamento DOCENTE</b>	6	1	2	4	2	2	1	1	1
<b>Creare CLIMA</b>	1	3	5	3	3	1	3	4	1
<b>Riconoscere IMPEGNO</b>		5	8	5	1	3	2		2
<b>Promuovere FIDUCIA</b>	5	6	3	2	4	4	4	2	2
<b>CONSEGNE appropriate</b>		2	1	7	6	6	5	5	
<b>Attività INTERESSANTI</b>		4	4		5	5	8	6	6
<b>Promuovere AUTONOMIA</b>		7	7	6	8	7	9	7	
<b>Orientare agli OBIETTIVI</b>		8	10	8	7	9	6	7	4
<b>Familiarizzare coi VALORI L2</b>	3	10	6	9	9	10	7	10	3
<b>Coesione del GRUPPO</b>	7	9	9	10	10	8	10		5

Figure 2. This summary encapsulates research conducted on students' perceptions of MotS, which were assessed on a scale ranging from 1 (indicating high relevance) to 10 (indicating low relevance). These findings were drawn from the work of Cucinotta in 2020.

According to this table, the role of teachers is fundamental for most of the students together with the creation of a positive atmosphere in the class. Staying at the top half of the ranking, we find recognition of student's commitment, and promotion of the student's self-confidence (Cucinotta, 2020). It is important to notice that teacher's behaviour and classroom's atmosphere can be related to the above-mentioned affective filter. It is clear that, before anything else, teachers need to create a safe classroom atmosphere in order to let pupils explore their emotions and reactions freely, without fearing their peers' or the teacher's judgment.

In order to help teachers in their arduous task of positive emotion awakening/maintaining, Balboni (2013) analysed some appraisal tools for positive emotions arousal and for emotional barrier removal:

- Novelty: it is important to diversify inputs, such as utilizing diverse materials like dialogues, advertisements, Facebook posts, songs, and employing a range of instructional methods, including both inductive and deductive exercises, while also setting diverse educational objectives, such as teaching argumentation skills and practical application of acquired knowledge

- Pleasure, beauty and aesthetical quality of the input: These considerations encompass elements such as the utilization of vivid colour prints, contemporary digital resources, and well-illuminated classroom settings.
- The assurance that one's self-confidence and social standing remain unharmed is essential, emphasizing the inherent human propensity for making mistakes and the subsequent capacity for learning from them. While negative emotions such as fear and anxiety may persist within a classroom, their impact can be mitigated, thereby reducing the significance of adverse consequences.
- The feasibility of the task entails recognizing that a particular activity may naturally pose challenges. It is imperative that when a teacher introduces a challenging exercise, he or she also delineates the expected moments of difficulty.
- Functional relevance: knowing that what the learner is doing has some relevance are significant for the goal.

In this chapter, we have provided a concise overview of the principal theories concerning motivation. While there exists a plethora of theories and definitions of motivation, commonalities and similarities can be discerned among them. These include the recognition that motivation can stem from diverse sources, the pivotal role emotions play in influencing learners' motivation, the contextual dependency of emotions, and the acknowledgment that teachers and their emotions are integral components of the learning environment. With regard to fostering positive emotions and motivation, we have examined several general strategies for educators to bear in mind, aiming to cultivate positive sentiments within the classroom and mitigate emotional barriers, often referred to as the affective filter.

In the ensuing chapter, we will delve into the topic of storytelling as an effective motivational tool. Our exploration of storytelling will encompass its historical origins, initially serving as a means for disseminating information, and its contemporary manifestations, which incorporate the utilization of digital technologies. Subsequently, we will concentrate on the application of storytelling within educational settings, with a particular focus on its implementation as a motivational tool in primary schools.



## Chapter 2

### Storytelling in Language Learning

This chapter will focus on storytelling and its relevance in language learning. The act of telling stories can be considered one of the oldest forms of teaching and it is present in all cultures and languages. After a brief presentation of its role in human history, storytelling (ST) will be discussed as a motivating practice to be used in language classrooms. Particular attention will be given to the characteristics of the stories and the related activities that can be carried out before, during and after the story.

#### 2.1. Relevance of Storytelling

Storytelling is one of the oldest and most effective tools used by humans to pass on knowledge, to preserve culture, and to inspire moral values (Lucarevschi, 2016). In its earliest forms, storytelling was mainly oral, and it was used to better understand the world we inhabit with the help of tales, legends, songs, and myths. The invention of writing first, and the ones of printing press and internet later, led to a revolution in the transmission of knowledge: as time went by, tales and myths evolved into written stories and, later, into novels and, more recently, into social media posts: the new form of telling our stories every day.

One of the firsts who focused on the importance of stories was Aristotle, in ancient Greek, underlining how myths and stories are a form of representing reality and human actions, giving us insight into the truth of a life story, the agents of the story, their actions, and the meaning of their actions (Kroflič, 2017). Many historically relevant figures and philosophers that followed, such as Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (the Grimm Brothers), and Hannah Arendt, focused on different aspects of stories, the importance of the telling process, and the relevance of stories in every aspect of life.

Being so ancient, storytelling is present in all cultures and languages. In every language, the phrase “once upon a time” awakes children attention because of its undoubtful meaning: a story is going to start (Ellis and Brewster, 2014). Those words dig deep into our primitive memory of listening stories that explain things, that recall facts and pass on useful ancient knowledge regarding predators, seasons, agriculture, and breeding (Laine cited in Falvey and Kennedy, 1997). Together with these examples of practical service, a story can help the audience in making future decisions presenting possible scenarios, and to deal with situations with critical awareness (Kroflič, 2017).

Stories and, particularly storytelling, can help children with empathy because they identify with the characters, their mood and their attitude, thanks to the mediation of the storyteller. Today, storytelling finds application in advertisements, education, and politics as a tool to inspire and influence. Stories are used by political candidate to connect with audience and to find supporters, while therapists use storytelling with their clients for its healing power. In education, storytelling has always been present, but now it is being placed a stronger emphasis on it, not only during “story hours” or “free time” (Anderson & Chua, 2010). Psychologists claims that stories play a crucial role in children education and personal development in relation to cognitive endeavours and feelings (Isik, 2016, 116). Stories increase the use of children’s fantasy and identification skills that help children to make future associations with problematic situations, and to understand abstract concepts such as “good” and “evil”, “freedom”, “love”, and “happiness”. Explaining these concepts to children can be hard, but the presence of concrete characters that embody them, such as villains and heroes, makes it easier for children to understand these concepts (Isik, 2016, 116).

## **2.2. Definitions of Storytelling**

It is not simple to choose among the many definitions of storytelling that experts provide. As reported in Anderson and Chua (2010), scholars seem to agree when defining this practice in its simplest form as “the act of communicating an event (or a sequence of events) to an audience, using words and/or physical movements” (p. 2): the sum of beliefs, practices and tales that are passed on primarily orally.

According to the means of expression, we count four types of storytelling: oral, visual, written, and digital. The first one, the oral one, as previously mentioned, is an ancient tool that involves a storyteller and one or more listeners. Being passed down orally, it is common to have numerous variations of a single story because every teller may choose to add details, or even whole characters, at will. Today, storytelling includes elders sharing their experiences with younger members in a community, teachers telling stories in the classrooms, family members recounting the day’s events at dinner, urban legends, and family stories. The second one, the visual storytelling, has been with us since cavemen’s rock carvings. It refers to stories which are told primarily, but not exclusively, through visual tools: from cave paintings to modern photos, comics, and picture books. Since this type of storytelling does not require a written text, it has room for variations. This leads to a significant advantage in terms of possible adjustments and customisation. The third type of storytelling is the written one or, better to say, storytelling through writing. It is important to point out the difference between written

storytelling and other types of writings. Storytelling is a performance, it means that it includes the use of body language, movements, and the tone of voice. A change in voice tone or in the direction of talking may suggest another person is talking, a change of perspective, while a writer needs to be more explicit. After the advent of printing press and literacy, written texts have gained the advantage to reach large audiences but, when we talk about storytelling, words are just prompts and their use is linked to the ability of the teller to use them as inspiration. At the heart of the struggle to give a definition to storytelling there is oral ST and written ST: according to the more traditional scholars, storytelling is the continuance of oral tradition, and they exclude the engagement of written texts and technologies.

The fourth one, digital storytelling, is so called because of the combination of spoken narrative and the use of technology. The use of technological devices implies that the visual factor plays a more prominent role in telling the story which, thanks to the internet, can reach a world-wide audience. According to Normann (2011), the focus of this type of storytelling is on producing and sharing a story using technology, but it also has specific characteristics that differ digital storytelling from a multimodal text made digital. Digital storytelling involves a story of two or three minutes long, where the teller uses his voice to tell a personal story or a memory. The emphasis of the teller results in an emotional impact on the audience. When reporting the seven elements of an effective ideal digital story, Normann (2011) refers to Lambert (2007), co-director at the 'Center for digital Storytelling' (California), where the idea of digital storytelling was originally developed.

The seven elements are:

- 1- First person narrative
- 2- Dramatic question (to resolve in the end)
- 3- Emotion evoking content
- 4- Economy: related to the length of the script. As above mentioned, the script should be two or three minutes long, terse and to the point. More than 300 are not necessary since, in digital storytelling, meaning can be communicated in many forms, not only words.
- 5- Rhythm, natural pacing, and a varied flow
- 6- Use of the voice
- 7- Use of a soundtrack

In a didactic perspective, teachers need to adapt these seven elements to meet learning objectives. With this aim, the story can be narrated in first or third person so a student can “tell

a story about self, about someone or about something” (Normann 2011, 4). When talking about language learning, digital storytelling is a motivating tool to practice oral, written, and digital competence. Students who develop this type of stories can improve their skills in asking questions, sharing their opinions, enhancing their proficiency in communication (Nair and Yunus, 2021). Students can produce stories on any content, and various subjects can be included in the activity such as art and crafts for the use of images (production and/or selection), music and technology for the use of audios, soundtracks, and use of specific software and of technological devices (“book creator” <https://bookcreator.com/>). Adding digital elements, can be useful to overcome possible restrictions, as we experienced during COVID-19 lockdown, or other scenarios that involve a period of distance from school for certain pupils. Some teachers may struggle facing these situations and keeping the motivation of these students high but, with digital support, these pupils would not miss the opportunity to learn in a fun and positive environment (Nair and Yunus, 2021) even if not physically, so they feel included in the class.

Definitions of storytelling differ also because of the different functions that ST can have. When talking about education of children and adults, Wajnryb (2003) defines a storied lesson as a “managed unit of time in the language-learning classroom during which some aspects of a story or stories are made available as a learning resource” (2003, 2). So, it can provide teachers and educators with a source to create personalised learning experience for their class (Nair and Yunus, 2021).

It is important to notice that all four types of storytelling have some aspects in common:

- 1- The presence of a teller and an audience.
- 2- A relatively short story.
- 3- The fact that the teller is not a simple reader, but he is a performer that needs to be spontaneous to give pupils the chance to experience real language.
- 4- The involvement of the whole body: facial expressions, body language, movements, and voice.

### **2.3. Storytelling and EFL learning in Primary Schools.**

Before describing the use of storytelling in schools, it is important to underline the situation of students that, as Willis (1996) points out, at the end of their studies, are unable to communicate in the foreign language that has been a subject during their school years. Although many of them pass their tests successfully, once they find themselves in a conversation, they feel too

shy or not able to cope with the situation. One of the reasons is that they have been exposed too little to real spoken interaction. Formal instruction is not sufficient for learning a language and can lead to a feeling of inadequacy in a situation that involves other speakers (especially native ones). A story-based approach can be used to overcome this situation in classes where children have different learning styles, different types of “intelligence” (Gardner cited in Ellis and Brewster, 2012) and different learning needs.

Even if a story-based approach can be used in relation to different school subjects, this chapter will focus on the use of this approach in the EFL context. ST is strongly related to language for the obvious reason that a story cannot be told without language (including non-verbal forms of language such as sign language). Children, that are usually familiar with narrations because of tales told by parents or other relatives, seem to enjoy this practice that is essential in the child development as it helps in both native and second language acquisition (Isik 2016). For this reason, stories can be used in classrooms to give examples of real language: using authentic language is crucial in the language learning processes, in L1 as well as in FL and L2 contexts. A reason to use a story-based approach is that stories are considered a motivating practice to be used in language classrooms, as they can generate positive feelings (Laine cited in Falvey and Kennedy, 1997) and develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language, culture, and language learning (Ellis and Brewster, 2014). It provides a motivational tool thanks to the rich and contextualised language (Ellis and Brewster, 2014) that can lead learners to read more and so to incorporate vocabulary to share their ideas (Laine cited in Falvey and Kennedy, 1997). As Laine notes (cited in Falvey and Kennedy, 1997, 66) storytelling can play an important role in classes where children are not motivated by the foreign language because they have no real need to use it. A story that is well chosen and well told can help to make the language enjoyable and comprehensible, changing children’s attitudes towards the language.

Another reason to use stories in classrooms is that they stimulate children’s imagination. They become personally involved as they identify with the characters and link their fantasy to the real world (Ellis and Brewster, 2014).

Listening to stories in class is also a shared social experience because provokes collective response of laughter, sadness, and excitement, which is important to build up the child’s confidence, and social and emotional development (Ellis and Brewster, 2014).

As aforementioned, ST can be linked to other school subjects such as science, history, art and design, geography and environment, and music using different methodologies, including CLIL

methodology<sup>3</sup>. Recent findings illustrate that using storytelling to teach vocabulary in language lessons allowed for explicit and incidental learning, and encouraged meaningful language use among children that recall a considerable number of single words and sentences (Kirsch, 2016).

In classrooms, storytelling can also serve as a revise tool, to reinforce vocabulary or to introduce some new words and sentence structures. Stories can also be used to present cultural elements and to make pupils aware of the differences in rhythm, intonation, and pronunciation of language (Ellis and Brewster, 2014). As this last sentence can suggest, the role of the storyteller is crucial. The teller is not just a *Vorleser*<sup>4</sup> : one of the main characteristics of storytelling is that the story is not already given. The teller needs to create the story spontaneously and, when written parts are present, they are supposed to serve just as a prompt. Storytelling is a child-centred activity, so the teacher/teller needs to be able to adapt the story to meet the class needs and the level of the pupils according to their age, vocabulary, personal interest, remaining motivating and spontaneous. The teller needs to tell the story slowly and clearly, and to give time to pupils to look at the pictures, to think, to ask questions and to make comments (Ellis and Brewster, 2014). The teller needs to familiarise with the book and illustrations, and to check unclear aspects, to be able to adapt the story for his class. It is important to remember who the story is for so, for example, the age and language level of the target audience. According to the idea of Krashen of comprehensible input, learners need appropriate exposure to language, within the range of access. That is to say, the telling needs to be accommodated to the level and lexicon of the listeners. The absence of a written text can be seen as a limit to those teachers who do not feel confident in the target language or who feel insecure about their proficiency in the language for various reasons. This may influence teachers' motivation (Macleroy et al, 2021 and Bier, 2014). The bonus of using storytelling is that adaptation can take place many times (Laine cited in Falvey and Kennedy, 1997), and teachers can use the vocabulary that makes them feel more comfortable. Indeed, the point of storytelling is not the complexity of structures, but to be spontaneous and repetitive to raise interest in children. The teller also needs to encourage pupils to take part in the story by asking them to repeat something or to look for objects in the picture. Making eye contact with the audience is also important and it is not possible if the teller is reading.

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<sup>3</sup> CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning. Its aim is to teach school subjects (history, science, art etc.) to students through a foreign language.

<sup>4</sup> German term that refers to a person who reads something out loud.

Being engaging, creative, and effective, stories have increasingly been chosen in more academic contexts of learning and teaching (Wajnryb, 2003) as a pedagogical tool for different school subjects. Being flexible in use and in adapting to pupils' characteristics, storytelling gives the chance to use imagination and pictures and to adapt them to the situation of the class which may include pupils of different ages, different cultures, different L1, students with special needs and children with different learning styles.

#### **2.4. Storytelling and related activities**

Wajnryb (2003), winner of the New South Wales Institute for Educational Research Award for Outstanding Educational Research, in her work *Stories: Narrative activities for language classroom*, defines a storied lesson as a managed unit of time in the language-learning classroom during which some aspects of a story or stories are made available as a learning resource. She points out that the ways a storied lesson can be made may vary: the story can be chosen by the teacher or emerge out of the collaborative efforts of the pupils; it can be fictional or based on real events; it can start the lesson and be a motivational tool, or the goal of the lesson can be to create the story.

Storytelling and related activities carried out before, during and after the story, can meet those essential conditions that, according to Willis (1996), are necessary in language learning. These essential conditions are exposure, use and motivation (Wajnryb, 2003) (Fig 3). In the classroom context, "use" is the opportunity to use the target language providing connected tasks before, during and after the story. Together with order expedient such as personal experiences, the "use" gives the students "motivation"<sup>5</sup> by presenting a purpose in learning the language: using the language to complete the tasks.

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<sup>5</sup> Given the variability in the definitions of "motivation," it is important to clarify that in the context of this study, the term is employed to denote the learner's orientation toward the objective of acquiring proficiency in the target language.

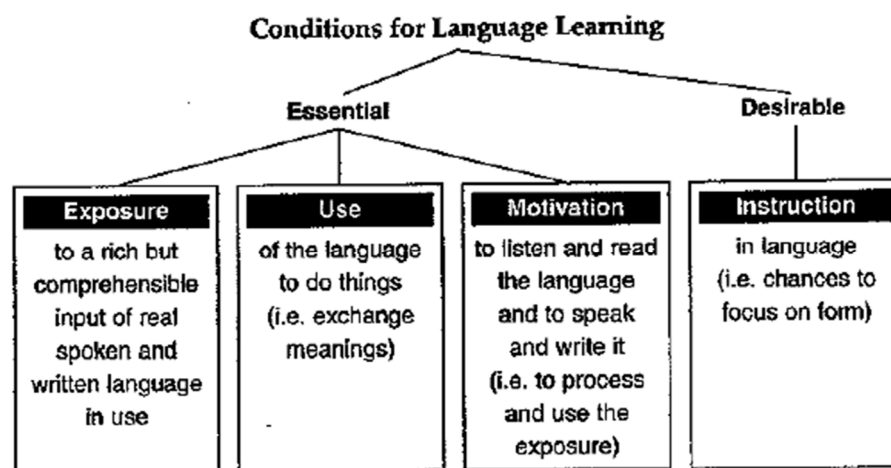


Figure 3. Report on the essential conditions for Language Learning (Willis, 1996)

Storytelling can be considered “exposure” to real spoken language in use. The story, as previously mentioned, need to be adapted. For beginners and children, knowing the topic can help them make prediction and check if they understand, and this helps acquisition.

Daloiso, and Favaro (2021) in their manual for teachers to create story-based activities, report that choosing an appropriate story is the first crucial step for a successful storytelling activity.

To create a story-based lesson, it is important to keep in mind the relevance of repetitions and recurrence: it is crucial to frequently involve children in situations where the target language is contextualized and used recurrently. Examples of contextualized language expressions to use in classroom daily include greetings (“Good morning”, “Bye bye”, “See you soon”, “Sit down, please”), idioms to express joy, approval and disapproval (“Good job!”, “Well done”, “You did it!”), expressions to underline specific moments of the day (“It’s snack time”, “It’s time to go home!”). These expressions and repetitive experiences such as songs, fairy tales, nursery rhymes etc., help children growing their motivation thanks to the feeling of safety that repetition gives them. Repetition is even more effective when it is presented with slight variations: tone of the voice, introduction of new elements etc. Repetition is important also to correct mistakes: it can be used as a strategy to give pupils the opportunity to note their mistakes and correct them independently. Talking about time and frequency of exposure to the foreign language, it is important to underlain that an activity in FL should last between 30 and 45 minutes, if moments of exposure to the FL are frequent during the week (Daloiso and Favaro, 2021).



Create a motivating environment is also important. As mentioned in the chapter dedicated to it, motivation is an essential element in the language learning process. Motivation for learning a foreign language might not be so strong in young pupils as the motivation they have to learn their first language. The goal is to propose activities that stimulate children's curiosity and interest in the language, in a peaceful environment. Speaking of environment, it is not necessary to have a particular "space" dedicated to the FL. The most important thing to take into consideration when talking about "where" the storytelling takes place is the quality of the space: cosy, comfortable and as quiet as possible, without other activities taking place at the same time. It can be useful to create a "Story corner" in the classroom, a specific area that children associate with storytelling, with the help of paper or fabrics to create a background or a curtain. The storytelling needs to be perceived as a special event and this can be done with changing positions, sitting in circle, sitting on the floor (Ellis and Brewster, 2014).

Important criteria to follow when choosing the story are the presence of a simple but stimulating plot, of pictures that need to be clear and evocative at the same time, of elements of surprise, humour, and suspense because surprise elements make the activity appealing.

The story can be chosen also for its familiarity to the children, the repetitive phrasal structure, the language used, and a context that children can associate with their own experience (Macleroy et al, 2021) An important element to consider is the presence of a catchy phrase to repeat several times during the narration, to help children maintaining the attention level high (Daloiso and Favaro, 2021). To support the comprehension of the story, the teller should perform a story that involve more senses. For the verbal dimension, the teller should use key words and articulate sounds clearly. The teller should modulate his voice during the performance using a different tone to underline important passages, he should change voice when performing a conversation to underline the alternation of the characters speaking in the dialogue. This will help children to empathize with the characters noticing a correlation between voice and emotions. For the non-verbal dimension, the teller can use support materials such as pictures, objects, and even puppets during dialogues for example. Maintaining eye contact with the audience is also important during the performance, together with facial expressions, gestures, and body language (Daloiso and Favaro, 2021). When speaking of gestures and body language, it is important to underline that some gestures are culture related and might be interpreted differently (for example the "Ok" gesture), so the teller needs to use gestures that are clear and immediately understandable. Mimicking a hug, the words "big" and "small", or activities such as hair brushing is generally comprehensible to children that shares common

experiences in the same country, but touching objects, showing pictures of people and places, and guide children in the mimicking of actions are more effective techniques to understand new words. Translation is to be avoided: it might interfere with the goal, stimulate motivation through real contextualized language, since it might cause some children to get lazy and not engaging in the comprehension. It would result in pupils waiting for the translation, so instead the teller should rephrase and use other expressions.

Presuming that teacher and teller could be the same person in a hypothetical classroom, or that they cooperate to the success of the storytelling activity, after reflecting on the environment and on the story to be told, the teacher should organize the activities planning, firstly, warming up activities to introduce the topic and to awake children's previous knowledge such as telling a personal experience related to the topic, showing pictures and asking questions (Isik 2016, 117). Pre-reading activities need to follow the warmup session to introduce the general topic, to raise children's motivation and to get them ready to think and note important pieces of information. While-reading activities are important to maintain students' attention and to make them focus on the topic (Isik 2016, 117): to promote active listening<sup>6</sup>, the teller should encourage children to repeat some catchy words, short phrases or onomatopoeic sounds that are related to the story, for example by asking them to recreate the sound of an animal or an object (cat, cow, clock, wind etc.), and to mimic actions for a *total physical response*<sup>7</sup> (Daloiso and Favaro, 2021). Activities that involve the use of more senses are to be preferred, as previously mentioned, since activities that involve movements can be used to give immediate meaning to some words avoiding translation. Moving and using hands to touch, to create a puppet, or to do a puzzle are activities that promote children's motivation and awake their attention because these different stimuli activate different sensorial channels, and this is why activities such as "listen and do" or "listen and mime" have a greater impact on the listener than "listen and repeat".

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<sup>6</sup> Listening that encompasses the engagement of all sensory faculties and entails active interaction with the speaker through both verbal and non-verbal responses, signifying a comprehensive understanding.

<sup>7</sup> James Asher, a distinguished professor emeritus of psychology at San José State University in California, USA, pioneered a learning strategy in the 1960s. This approach was developed through his observations of language development in young children acquiring their first language. Known as Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) theory, it posits that communication directed at children primarily comprises imperative statements like "Stand up!" or "Clap your hands!" According to Asher, TPR aligns with the natural progression of language acquisition, as children initially respond to these commands physically before transitioning to verbal responses.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/approaches-and-methods-in-language-teaching/total-physical-response/6C166476EBD2F4449D0192297E20573D>

Encourage production is important but pupils do not have to feel forced to do that if they don't feel ready to avoid negative feelings. Having a language routine helps children to automatise some phrases or answers and, once it is automatized, it requests a minimum effort. When a line has been repeated several times, it also gives the opportunity to try out pupils' anticipation ability, interrupting the sentence and letting them finish it. Repeating together is a valid way to let the more introvert pupils to experiment with the language in a safe environment, without the fear of making mistakes in front of peers, or the fear of the teacher pointing out possible mistakes (Daloiso and Favaro, 2021). On the other hand, in front of pupils attempt of production it is important to maintain a motivating and encouraging attitude with verbal ("Well Done!", "Good job!", "Excellent") and non-verbal responses (smiling, nodding, clapping hands...). When pupils' production needs correction, it is essential to give constructive and encouraging feedbacks, avoiding a direct approach to the mistake ("This is wrong. Repeat after me!"). Alternatives to the direct approach are reformulating the line, spelling a word, repeating together, and using non-verbal language and pictures to point out differences in pronunciation (three and tree) (Daloiso and Favaro, 2021).

After-reading activities are also crucial and result motivating for students who feel that there is a "follow up" (Isik 2016, 117). It is important to note that not all activities have a large language element, some are significant because they arise positive feeling in pupils who need to perceive the FL as funny, creative, and enjoyable (Ellis and Brewster cited in Isik 2016, 117).

After this short presentation of Storytelling and the importance of this tool in education, the next chapter will describe an experimentation of a story and a series of related activities to promote motivation in a class of 13 seven-year-old pupils of a primary school in the province of Venice (Italy). These students, who study English as a foreign language, come from different parts of the world (Italy, Peru, Albania, Ukraine and Moldavia) and have different L1 backgrounds. Some of them have behavioural problems and others have a diagnosis of autism. The story and the activities are designed for this class and intend to awake motivation in the pupils and intend to promote the inclusive participation of all students.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Storytelling Pilot Project**

This chapter will give a description of a storytelling activity in English for primary school students aged 7. Specifically, it will present the story text used and the related activities presented to the class. It is important to mention that the story was used in two separate moments during the school year. The first time, to introduce the characters to the class, to revise colours, and to anticipate the vocabulary related to food and beverages. The story second time, to further explore both the vocabulary and cultural aspects emerging from the narrative. This chapter will focus on the second storytelling activity that was carried out over two weeks in the month of May 2023.

#### **3.1. The Context**

The story and the activities that follow have been presented to a class of 13 seven-year-old pupils, 6 girls and 7 boys, who attend a primary school in the province of Venice (Italy). Six out of 13 students come from different countries: one is from Peru, two from Albania, one from Moldova, one from Morocco and one from Ukraine who fled the country with her family after the beginning of the war with Russia. These pupils have different linguistic backgrounds, and some do not speak Italian at home. Other students were born in Italy and speak Italian at home. As far as English is concerned, the students have similar previous experiences with the language, except for one student who attended a bilingual kindergarten. Although the extent of their exposure to the English language outside of the classroom is unknown, it is likely that they watch cartoons and YouTube videos and play video games that contain English words. As a matter of fact, several students make use of English expressions, possibly related to video games or TV shows, such as “the end”, “jump”, “well done”, “next” and so on.

In the class there are three students with special needs: two of them were diagnosed with autism and one with language disorders. These three children are usually supported by a special education teacher and two professionals: a support worker (OSS) who helps these pupils with their basic needs, and an educator who promotes the inclusion of the children with the autism diagnosis during social moments. These professionals are not always present in class, and they are rarely present all at the same time. It is important to mention the fact that one of the students with an autism diagnosis shows special interest in the English language. The child, who is considered non-verbal in Italian L1, shows a wider vocabulary when communicating in the FL, compared to that of the other students, in both written and spoken English.

The pupils did not attend the last year of kindergarten due to the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In their first year of primary school in 2022, the students experienced an environment with physical distancing restrictions, which precluded teachers from engaging them in group activities. During the first year, a one-hour English class was scheduled once a week and consisted of a lecture-style lesson that involved using the textbook and listening to songs that were included in the book. That year, the English teacher was also the physical education teacher. She frequently cancelled PE class in favour of focusing on English, without informing the other teachers or reviewing the day's schedule in advance. This caused frustration in the children who favoured PE class over English class and in those with special needs who relied on the timetable being adhered to. A timetable is crucial for the whole class because it enables children to anticipate what will happen next helping them to develop socially and emotionally (Dujmović, 2006). The inclusion of PE on the schedule excited students, whereas removing it produced an overwhelming sense of frustration. In their second year of primary school in 2023, the previously mentioned restrictions were no longer in force and pupils were able to experience working in groups, having desk partners, and going on school trips. In 2023 the English teacher changed. Students spent more time with the English teacher, who also taught maths and science, but not PE.

Concerning the general English level of the class at the time the storytelling activity was presented, pupils were able to answer simple personal questions concerning their name and age. They were familiar with colours and numbers (from one to 10), and they could identify several school items that they frequently used. In order to expose children to the foreign language as much as possible, every morning pupils were required to complete a 'visual calendar': a wall bulletin board with short straightforward sentences indicating the date and weather. The children were asked to fill in the gaps with the appropriate information in English regarding that specific day. To do so they used cards that accurately reported the day of the week, month, and weather symbol (Figg. 4 and 5).



Figure 4. A student helping one of the students with special needs completing the task.



Figure 5. English 'Visual Calendar' used in classroom to promote daily use of the target language.

Regardless of whether English class was on the daily schedule or not, once the calendar was completed, teachers and students recited the date aloud before the start of class. To further familiarise them with the language, students were frequently praised with English expressions such as “Well done!”, “Good job!”, “You did it!”, “Excellent!” or, when needed, with “Oh no! Try again!”, “One more time!”, “You can do this!”. They were familiar with everyday commands and requests such as “Sit down, please”, “Attention, please”, “Help me!”. Some of these expressions were also written on wall posters, on the classroom door (Fig. 6) and on the cards taped to the teacher’s desk (Fig.7).



Figure 6. “Kindness Confetti” on classroom door to further familiarise students with the language.



Figure 7. Example of daily expressions used to stimulate children’s verbal production.

The pupils could also consult expressions written on coloured pieces of paper and called “Kindness Confetti”. These 'confetti' caught the kids’ attention and they would occasionally read them during breaks and when they had to wait in a queue. In order to encourage the students' speech production, the teachers frequently used terms that were straightforward and simple to repeat. These expressions quickly became automatism for the children. These meaning-based activities<sup>8</sup> developed competency in oral production, vocabulary, and comprehension. Children require meaningful routines as well as opportunities to practice their skills in the foreign language (Maureen et al, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Meaning-based activity is an approach to language acquisition which involves connecting terms with concrete items and with the learner’s environment. The aim of this approach is for learners to easily and effectively connect with the topic at hand.

### 3.2. The Book and the Story

The book *The adventures of Nora and Pip* comes with a manual for teachers and educators of pre-school pupils written by Dalloiso and Favaro (2021). The manual introduces the practice of storytelling and gives tips and suggestions for *telling a story with the aim of developing a foreign language*. The aim of the manual is to help and stimulate teachers and those who want to undertake this type of activity in the classroom context without the help of a professional storyteller. This manual, as well as others such as *Tell it Again!* by Brewster and Ellis (2014), is a handbook for teachers on how to prepare for storytelling and how to adapt stories and activities for students. Both manuals offer an overview on storytelling, a guide to narrate stories, suggestions for the room setting, and hints for reflection and for teachers' self-evaluation.

Dalloiso and Favaro's (2021) handbook comes with an original picture book, *The adventures of Nora and Pip*, which presents 8 different stories about Nora and her pet friend, Pip. Since the age of the girl is not specified in the book, every pupil between 5 and 10 years old can relate to Nora and her stories. The hypothetical target audience is a class of pre-school children. Nevertheless, as the covered themes are numerous, they can be easily adapted for primary-school classes focusing on topics that meet the textbook table of contents (numbers, foods, colours, daily routine, clothes etc.).

This specific book has been chosen because it includes pictures that are simple and clear, which is important since children's reading and learning rely heavily on visual perception (Yu, 2012). Images are crucial in developing children's observation skills and their ability to provide information through vision (Ellis and Brewster, 2014). Illustrations play an essential role as young learners gain knowledge and enhance their ability to process and organise visual information. The back of every picture gives a smaller version of the image, so the teller doesn't need to turn the page to look at it. This gives more time to pupils to inspect the images, look for details trying to gather pieces of information from the characters in the foreground and from the background. The interaction between children and picture books is an information-seeking and meaning-interpreting process (Yu, 2012). The book also includes a written version of a possible story for storytellers and teachers who do not have much experience with storytelling and that feel more confident having an outline to follow. The authors' plot is simple, with short sentences and easy language, for self-trained teachers and teachers who lack confidence in the FL. It can, however, be tailored to children of different ages and language proficiency by giving more space to some elements of the story or making



predictions about the characters. There is also room on the back of the images for the teacher to take notes or to write down some keywords that may be useful during the storytelling activity. The book also includes a digital version of the story in which a storyteller offers a possible interpretation of each story to a class of puppets. Teachers who want to tell a story to their students can use this tool as a guideline and practise presenting the narrative while paying attention to the language used, the length of the story, the repetitions, and the usage of images.

### **3.3. The Storyteller**

As mentioned above, the storyteller can be either a professional or the class teacher. The story of Nora and Pip was read to the pupils by the author of this thesis who is not a professional storyteller. The author is present in class everyday as a support teacher for 3 children with special needs but is perceived by the students as a point of reference as much as the other teachers. Since the beginning of the school year there has been great cooperation between the author and the English teacher. Noticing the general lack of motivation towards English as FL in the class, the teachers examined various possibilities, and finally decided to implement a storytelling project. In a context where the subject teacher did not feel at ease with the idea of telling the story herself, the author was chosen as the storyteller, with the school principal's approval, as a co-teaching<sup>9</sup> experiment. The storyteller felt more comfortable with telling the story thanks to her frequent exposure to the language, a degree in foreign languages (American English and German) and other reasons related to familiarity with vocabulary, pronunciation, and proficiency in the foreign language. As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, because teachers and students are constantly interacting with one another, the quality of those interactions determines the outcome of the lessons. (Bier, 2014). A feeling of inadequacy can be a cause of demotivation in teachers, and this can negatively affect the activity as well as the students' motivation (Dörnyei e Ushioda, 2011). In the light of this, a comfortable, cheerful relationship between the storyteller and the audience was deemed critical for the activity's success since it draws the participants together and fosters mutual trust (Dujmović, 2006). The

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<sup>9</sup> Co-teaching is a teaching strategy that involves two or more teachers in the designing, teaching, and evaluating process of a heterogeneous group of students. Usually, the teachers involved are the curricular teacher and the support teacher, who work together to provide inclusive educational proposals to the classroom. The purpose of the co-teaching strategy is to eradicate the hierarchy between curricular and support teachers: they both take active part in the lesson and must address the teaching act to the whole class, including students with special educational needs. Co-teaching represents an opportunity to narrow differences among pupils of the same class because they are all in the same room sharing the same experience, and to implement the skills of students who shows exceptional interest and potential. Having two teachers in the same room represents the chance to give more support to children, not only those with special needs, and promote the participation of all students as more adults are present in the room to listen and share others' opinions. (Ianes and Cramerotti, 2015; p.61)

storyteller's background will affect how the story is told. The emotional state, as well as the relationship with the audience, are crucial (Dujmović, 2006). Not being a professional storyteller and wanting to perform the story effectively, the author used the manual for teachers and educators that comes with the book *The adventures of Nora and Pip*, together with the digital version of the book, to practice her performance with possible variations. Indeed, it is important to remember that the storyteller is not a simple reader, and she/he should not learn the story by heart or read the story aloud. This would make the storytelling artificial. On the other hand, practice is essential to the beginners (Dujmović, 2006). In accordance with the programme for the school year, the textbook used with the children, the situation of the class, the personal interests of the students and their English level, the storyteller chose the story, defined the objectives, and prepared the related activities. In fact, it is important for the storyteller to practice and prepare for the activity by familiarising him/herself with the book and the illustrations, knowing the content and preparing for possible questions, listening to the story and use it as an example, and reading it aloud to increase confidence and practise dramatization (Ellis and Brewster, 2014). After that, the author decided how to tell the story and adapted it to the class. The terminology and syntax used in the picturebook were specifically chosen by the author, who also looked for potential sources of frustration, anxiety, or rage. When it came to vocabulary and general meaning, the storyteller looked for words that needed to be rephrased and examples to make the meaning of the story clearer (Dujmović, 2006). She decided to tell the story in the present simple tense, as it was about Nora's daily routine. This is because in longer stories for students with higher language skills, it is vital to examine whether there are too many tenses, different word orders, or other elements that could result confusing (Dujmović, 2006). The storyteller also chose when to pause, what sort of questions to ask and how to encourage students' active participation, how to use gestures, mime, and facial expressions to make the meaning of words and actions more explicit (Ellis and Brewster, 2014).

### **3.4. The Pre-reading Activities**

As previously stated, the storytelling activities lasted several hours and were carried out over the course of two weeks in May 2023. The storytelling and related activities were planned to be performed over a longer period of time in order to make children perceive the storytelling and activities as something they would do more than once, not just on the day the story was performed. Being unfamiliar with storytelling activities, the sessions were short in order to not over-extend students' attention span. (Ellis and Brewster, 2014)

### **3.4.1. Warm Up**

The first activity related to the story began during the first few minutes of the lesson. It was a warm-up activity aimed at introducing the topic and at activating previous knowledge. Students were sitting on the floor in the school hall when the teacher/storyteller began acting unhappy and complaining in Italian but repeating some keywords in English. The conversation with the class started with the teacher stating that she was hungry because she had only eaten a single cookie for breakfast instead of a full breakfast with milk, coffee, chocolate, cereals etc as usual. The children's attention was instantly drawn to the names of food and sweets, and they spontaneously began chatting about what they like to eat. The teacher then invited each student to describe their regular morning and share their own experiences with breakfast with the class. This warm-up activity was designed to provide a context for the story and introduce the topic. Personal questions were asked in order to make students feel involved by connecting aspects of their own lives to those in the story (Dujmović, 2006). Special consideration was given to students with different cultural backgrounds who may have different breakfast habits, but without explicitly mentioning this to allow students to identify possible differences on their own. After being asked to describe their typical breakfast, they were asked about their Sunday breakfast, other special occasions, and if there was any food that their parents would not allow them to have for breakfast. After hearing about the pupils' personal experiences, the storyteller announced that it was time for the audience to enter the classroom.

### **3.4.2. English Breakfast**

The teachers led the pupils to their classroom, where desks had been arranged to form a table in the centre of the room. Bacon, bread, buttered toast, and baked beans were made available to the students along with other foods that are not typically part of a full English breakfast (milk, cereals, jam, and so on), allowing them to sit together and enjoy a convivial moment. The purpose of this activity was to motivate students and stimulate their interest by presenting a different room setting, and an unusual activity to do in the classroom. They were confused by some of the dishes such as baked beans and bacon, so the teacher took the opportunity to explain that different cultures may have different morning meals and that they were experiencing an English breakfast. Starting with the typical English breakfast ingredients, the teachers used plastic-coated flash cards (Fig. 8) to introduce all foods and drinks that were present on the table in the FL.



Figure 8. *Examples of plastic-coated flash cards used during the activities.*

### **3.4.3. Representation on the Exercise Book**

Once the classroom had been reset and the desks and chairs had been placed in their usual configuration, pupils sat down, and they were asked once more, about what they usually eat for breakfast. The teacher encouraged students to try to express themselves using the new vocabulary in the FL. Their answers were written on the whiteboard in the FL, together with vocabulary related to the typical English breakfast. Students were then instructed to note down the new vocabulary in their exercise books, along with simple illustrations of foods and beverages. The purpose of the activity was to help children to focus on the vocabulary and on what they experienced in class, using their imagination to draw their own visual representation of the foods in their exercise books. This activity proved to be valuable during the evaluation phase of the process. The storytelling project did not include any evaluation of what the pupils were able to remember from the story. Notwithstanding this, the principal planned a test with the aim to assure that pupils of different classrooms were on the same page. It is essential to keep in mind that the storytelling activity outlined in this thesis was crafted to stimulate students' motivation to learn English, without undermining the teachers involved in the process. The activity was meant to help children focus on the vocabulary immediately after the English breakfast, to offer a revision tool to be used before tests and also to suit the needs of parents who want to see what their children learn at school. The activity was carried out immediately after the English Breakfast experience because it was a highly motivating activity that generated a positive response in the students. The same positive response will be awakened

and remembered by the students when revision time comes and every time that they will see that page in their exercise books.

### **3.5. The During-reading Activities**

While the storytelling was happening, some while-reading activities were performed to help students to focus on the topic. These activities, which will be better represented later in this chapter, included word repetition, answering a simple question that is frequently posed throughout the story, total physical response activities, and promoting pupils' non-verbal and verbal production by using incomplete words<sup>10</sup> and sentences.

The story revolves around Nora and her pet friend, Pip. The audience follows Nora during her typical morning routine: from the moment she wakes up to the moment she leaves for school. The first story was chosen because pupils can relate to the main character as, in this story, Nora does what most children do on a typical midweek day: she is woken up by someone, she goes to the bathroom, she eats something, she gets ready and leaves for school. For this storytelling activity, the learning objectives were the revision of the vocabulary related to colours, and the introduction of vocabulary related to food and drinks.

As highlighted in the chapter concerning storytelling, the environment where the story is performed is crucial. At first, the teachers were inclined to perform it in a different classroom. They excluded the library and other areas of the building due to the presence of elements deemed to be distracting for the students with special needs and for those who generally struggle to remain focused during lessons. Students with special needs associate some of these rooms with specific activities. In fact, every day these children complete some tasks that are aimed at promoting the development of their independences: doing grocery shopping, setting the table, making pasta using a pasta machine to increase their fine motor skills. These classroom-activity associations could have been counterproductive for the storytelling experience, so the teachers decided to perform the story in the usual classroom, changing the furniture setting to create a "Story corner" that children could associate with storytelling. During a previous reading, children were sitting on cushions on the floor: a unique event for this class as they are used to sitting on a chair behind their desk. Some of the pupils were happy to see the class setting change so drastically and excited to sit comfortably on the floor. For others, the new setting was a bit too overwhelming: some of the students with special needs,

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<sup>10</sup> In Italian "parole e frasi sospese". This expression refers to the practice that involves the use of incomplete words or small sentences to encourage speech development in children. Interrupting a familiar word before the final syllable, for example, induces the students to complete it mechanically.

who do not feel at ease when something changes drastically, started exhibiting problematic behaviours and frequently seeking attention thus undermining the concentration for both the storyteller and the audience. The situation described above made the activity unsuccessful because of the stress that it caused, but thanks to this experience the author came up with a different setting for future readings. Indeed, during the storytelling activity presented in this thesis, pupils were sitting in a semi-circle (Fig. 9) on their chairs instead of cushions. This was perceived as a less drastic change and the activity proved to be less frustrating for those kids who struggled during the first reading, as well as for the other students and teachers.

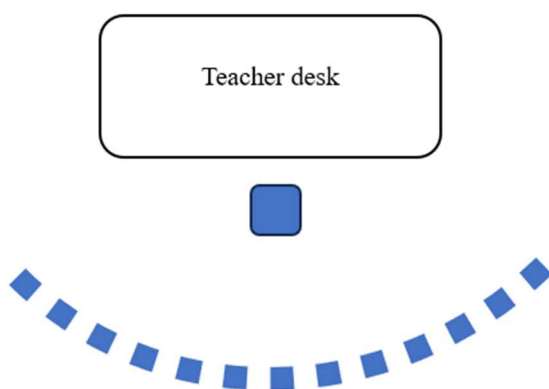


Figure 9. *This image represents the room setting during the storytelling activity<sup>11</sup>.*

At the beginning of the activity, even though the kids had previously been introduced to the characters, the storyteller reintroduced Nora and Pip to the audience, along with Lizzie, a spider involved in the narrative. Lizzie enjoys playing hide and seek, the storyteller said, and the pupils were asked to locate her in the pictures. The full picture of the spider is on the book's final page, but the storyteller decided to introduce Lizzie first, in order to prepare the children for what they would be looking for. The spider is amiably waving to the kids, so even those pupils who feel uncomfortable with spiders, do not feel scared and will not have an oppositional attitude when it comes to looking for Lizzie in the story. The storyteller named the spider Lizzie because it is a short name, and it was easy to remember for the pupils since it resembles the

<sup>11</sup> The “Story corner” was set up in front of the teacher’s desk. The bigger square in front of the desk represents where the teacher was sitting during the performance. Smaller squares, arranged in a semicircle, represent students’ chairs and how they were sitting during the story. The semicircle disposition allowed the students to watch the pictures and the storyteller, with her expressions and gestures, for the entire duration of the activity. Teachers made some space in the centre of the room, setting the chairs in a semicircle. Pupils sat as they pleased, in no specific order, and they were asked to get ready to listen to a story.

nickname of one of the girls in the class. The choice of the name is not casual. The girl we are referring to is the latest addition to the class and her actual name is long and difficult to pronounce for the other classmates, particularly for those with special needs. As it had been the case with other students, she has been given a nickname to promote inclusion and facilitate interactions with the class. Giving one of the characters her name was meant to make her feel more involved in the story and in the class. In order to keep the children's interest, the storyteller uses Lizzie to have a repetitive sentence: catchy phrase to repeat regularly during the narration. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this was intended to ensure the children's focus on the story by participating in the narration giving them the chance to repeat simple lines and to look at the pictures for answers to the teacher's question (Ellis and Brewster, 2014).



N. turn	Speaker	Non-verbal
1	<p>Ok kids, it's story time!</p> <p>This is Lizzie. She is a spider.</p> <p>It's wearing a bow. It's a girl-spider!!</p> <p>What colour is the bow?</p>	<p>The storyteller points to the bow and associates the term with the item in order to help students understand the meaning of the word.</p>
2	<p>She loves playing hide and seek. She is hiding in the book.</p>	<p>The storyteller hides behind the book several times and asks students to offer suggestions on what the word "hiding" might mean to help them understand the narration.</p>
3	<p>So, Lizzie hides, and you need to find her!</p> <p>When I ask you "Can you see Lizzie here?" you answer "yes" or "no".</p>	<p>Before going any further with the story, two pictures were used as examples: the storyteller asked two pupils with special needs to find Lizzie in those pictures. The question was rephrased in different</p>

		ways, and it was asked using both FL and L1: “Vedi uno spider qui? Vedi Lizzie? Can you see a spider here?”. Another student was taken as an example. The storyteller asked him to hide under a table and then asked the audience “Can you see Mario?”. The purpose of this part of the activity was to determine whether or not everyone in the class understood the question's meaning.
4	Are you ready? Ok let's start.	

To make the story easier to follow, different language structures were used. To support children's understanding, the storyteller reformulated some phrase using similar terms such as “hide and seek” and “hiding”.

The storyteller offered a question regarding the colour of the bow to test students' comprehension and to encourage audience oral output. Students were already familiar with hues and questions regarding colours at this point in the year. Having learned colours and being familiar with questions about this topic, the word “bow” is to be considered the aspect of language that the acquirer has not yet learned but that he/she is ready to acquire (Krashen, 1985).

To keep the children's attention, the storyteller asked a question that would be repeated throughout the storytelling activity. The question was always asked in the same way, and the storyteller also provided two alternative responses. The presentation of the replies was intended to foster verbal production in the target language, reassure pupils, and make them feel capable of addressing the issue. In this scenario, the task was to find lizzie in the pictures and to answer the question. Providing two possible answers was intended to let them know that they did not have to provide extended or detailed responses: brief ones, using vocabulary they were already



familiar with, were perfectly acceptable. It is important for children with language disorders not to feel forced to answer (Daloiso and Favaro, 2021).

PIC 2



N. turn	Speaker	Non-verbal
1	This is Nora And this is her friend, Pip.	The storyteller points at the girl and at the duck.
2	Say "Hello, Nora! Hello, Pip!"	The storyteller touches her mouth and waits for the audience to repeat.
3	Nora is a girl, and she has big black eyes! What colour is her hair?	The storyteller points at her eyes and at her hair.
4	And her shoes?	The storyteller points at the shoes.
5	What colour is Pip? What colour is his beak?	The storyteller mimics a beak in front of her mouth and then points at Pip's beak and gives time to the audience to elaborate the answer.
6	What colour is his head?	The storyteller points at Pip's head.
7	Can you see Lizzie here? No? Correct! Lizzie is not here. Ok. We can go on.	To answer this question, the storyteller allows the pupils to

		stand to take a closer look at the picture.
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Some of the gestures used by the storyteller, such as tapping her mouth, were gestures commonly used during classes and unstructured moments with the class, particularly with children with linguistic difficulty. Pupils were accustomed with this gesture and understood what it meant: repeat verbally what the teacher was saying. It was intended to encourage verbal interactions between students who have issues with language and tend to avoid verbal production and their peers.

The names of the characters and words were pronounced slowly by the storyteller. It is important to articulate every word clearly to help children understanding the story. It is important to give students time to think about the answer. Asking questions, looking at the pictures and making comments is also important (Dujmović, 2006). To prevent negative emotions and affective filter, the questions were asked to the entire class rather than just one individual student. Students need to feel free to answer or not to answer the questions. This is done to prevent awkward emotions and promote a relaxed comfortable attitude. Before answering the questions, students were free to chat and debate them. Following their response, the storyteller provided positive reinforcement or encouraged them to try again.

PIC 3



N. turn	Speaker	Non-verbal
1	Shhh! Nora is sleeping.	The storyteller snores with eyes closed and head resting on the palm of her hand, pretending she is asleep.
2	Knock, knock! Who's there?	The storyteller knocks on the desk behind her to reproduce

		the sound of someone knocking on a door.
3	Oh, it's Nora's dad. And what's in his hand?	The storyteller's facial expression reflects perplexity.
4	Yes! Good job! A schoolbag! A red schoolbag!	The storyteller expresses happiness at the completed assignment through facial expressions.
5	"Wake up, Nora. It's time to go to school."	
6	Can you see Lizzie here? No? Correct! Lizzie is not here. Ok. We can go on.	

Students were familiar in the fundamental lexicon of school items. Although, they were not familiar with body parts, pointing at the object helped students in making hypotheses about the teacher's question. The storyteller changed her voice to imitate a man's voice. Indeed, employing diverse voices is important to help children distinguish between characters, keep their attention, and convey meaning. (Dujmović, 2006).

PIC 4

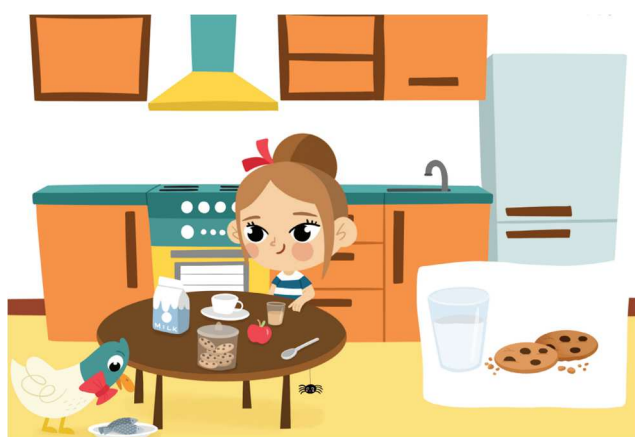


N. turn	Speaker	Non-verbal
1	Now Nora is in the bathroom, she is getting ready! Let's get ready with Nora!	
2	Stand up!	The storyteller stands up and invites the audience to mimic along replicating her movements and gestures.

3	Let's have a wee-wee. Pshhhh	The storyteller and the audience squat while simulating the noise of water falling.
4	Wash your face!	The storyteller and the audience scrub their faces.
5	Wash your teeth!	The storyteller and the audience mimi teeth brushing.
6	Brush your hair!	The storyteller and the audience mimi hair brushing.
7	Get dressed, put your clothes on!	The storyteller and the audience pretend to put clothes on.
8	Well done, class! Good job!	The storyteller's face expresses joy, and she claps at the audience to show her approval.
9	Can you see Lizzie here? No? Correct! Lizzie is not here. Ok. We can go on.	

The storyteller heavily relied on onomatopoeic sounds when describing this image in order to help the audience grasp the meaning of the verbs and body parts. Movement was also essential in this part of the story. Using physical movement to react to verbal inputs was intended to reduce inhibitions and lower students' stress level. To introduce the vocabulary related to daily routine, the *Total Physical Response Technique* was employed to work on students' listening skills and comprehension, replicating how children learn their first language (Asher, 1969).

PIC 5



N. turn	Speaker	Non-verbal
1	Now Nora is having breakfast.	

2	For breakfast Nora eats biscuits and one apple!	The storyteller points at the objects while naming them and mimics the verb “eat” raising her hand towards her open mouth pretending to eat an apple.
3	And she drinks milk.	The storyteller mimics the verb “drink” raising her hand towards her mouth pretending to drink from a glass.
4	What does Pip eat for breakfast?	The storyteller points at Pip and then at the fish.
5	Fish! Correct! Well done!	
6	Can you see Lizzie here? Yes?	The storyteller acts surprised.
7	Where? Under the table?	The storyteller combines the word “under” with a hand gesture.
8	Good job! You did it! You found Lizzie! Well done!	The storyteller expresses happiness at the completed assignment through facial expressions.

Some words, such "breakfast," were emphasised by the narrator using her voice. For easier comprehension, onomatopoeic sounds were placed after the verbs expressing eating and drinking.

Because not all students were familiar with the vocabulary, the audience's answers were welcomed in both English and Italian. It is critical to keep in mind that the purpose of this storytelling exercise was to inspire kids. During storytelling, interest can be communicated in a variety of ways. One way that students may express their drive and want to respond is by feeling a sense of urgency. Since the goal was to boost their motivation and build their confidence rather than to evaluate their vocabulary, the storyteller fully welcomed any responses made in Italian or through gestures, pointing, and mimicking. In this case, some pupils answered in Italian while other tried to point at the spider by standing up and getting

closer to the picture. The objective was to keep their attention, so all the answers were accepted and after their answers, children were encouraged with familiar verbal expressions.

PIC 6



N. turn	Speaker	Non-verbal
1	Brrr! It's cold outside!	The storyteller starts shaking pretending to feel cold.
2	Nora is wearing a hat and a jacket!	The storyteller points at the objects while naming them.
3	What colour is the hat?	The storyteller points at the hat again.
4	What colour is the jacket?	The storyteller points at the jacket again.
5	Oh, look at Pip! He is wearing a scarf! What colour is his scarf?	The storyteller points at the scarf.

Once again, the storyteller relied on onomatopoeic sounds when describing this image in order to help the audience grasp the meaning of the word “cold”. Students trying to translate it could be misled by the word's pronunciation, in this case. For instance, it has a similar sound to the hot/warm Italian word “caldo”. The storyteller took the opportunity to introduce the concept of “false friends”- terms that sound similar to some Italian words but have a different meaning and might result in misinterpretations.

PIC 7



N. turn	Speaker	Non-verbal
1	Oh, look! Here comes dad again	
2	Hurry up, Nora! It's time to go to school!	
3	What's in his hands? The schoolb...	
4	The schoolbag! Correct! A blue schoolbag?	The storyteller points at the schoolbag expressing uncertainty about the colour.
5	Oh you are right! It's a red schoolbag!	
6	Now we have to say bye to Nora and Pip! Bye, Nora! Have a nice day!	The storyteller touches her mouth and then waves her hand in greeting

As in picture number 3, the storyteller altered her voice to simulate a man's voice to help children notice a character change.

In turn n. 3, the narrator encouraged oral output by using incomplete words. As was already indicated, kids were already familiar with the vocabulary associated with school-related items, so completing these terms needed little effort. They were determined to respond since they knew they had a solid chance of answering correctly because the term was already familiar to the group. This increased students' knowledge-related self-confidence and promoted oral production.

### 3.6. The Post-reading Activities

As mentioned in Chapter 2, after-reading activities are also crucial for the motivation process. Pupils perceive that there is a follow up to what they have experienced since the beginning of the activities, and that the new vocabulary finds application in more tasks. Not all the activities that follow require a significant linguistic effort from the students, some were performed to arise positive feelings in pupils and to increase the cooperation and inclusion towards the

classmates with special needs. The aim of the storytelling experience reported in this dissertation was to teach students that learning English can be fun and creative.

### **3.6.1. What Do You Eat for Breakfast?**

The activity that followed the story was meant to introduce the idea of "borrowed words" while simultaneously allowing students to use the new language they had just acquired. It was intended to draw their attention to the fact that several food items, including "hamburger," "pancakes," and "banana," had the same name in other languages.

Children were therefore divided into two groups. Every group received a set of cards (the same plastic-coated flash cards that were previously used during the pre-reading activities to introduce the typical English breakfast) representing food, which were placed on a desk that served as a breakfast table. The activity was a listening activity: pupils needed to listen to the teacher, who provided a short list of foods that she wanted to eat for breakfast. Children needed to work in group and leave on the desk only the requested items so as to prepare the table for the teacher. To start the game pupils needed to repeat all together "What do you eat for breakfast?" at every round, and the teacher replied, to make an example, "Today I eat pancakes, sausages and juice." The activity was repeated more than once and some of the children, with the help of the teacher, made their own list of what they wanted to eat for breakfast and challenged their classmates.

For this activity particular attention was paid to the choice of the images. It was important for the pictures to be clear for every student. For this reason, the pictures were first presented to the students with special needs. They were asked to identify, in Italian, the foods and drinks represented on the flash cards. This passage resulted crucial in the decision-making process of the images because, from this first submission, it emerged that one of the pictures (Fig. 9) was not clear for the non-verbal student who interpreted the image as "versa" instead of as "latte", and so the picture was replaced with a new one (Fig.10) to make the activity more inclusive and accessible for the entire class.





Figure 9. *Original picture interpreted as Figure 10. New picture that contributed to 'pouring' by one of the students with special needs making the activity more inclusive.*

This activity was multisensorial: vision and hearing were the main senses, but touch was also involved as the plastic-coated flash cards added a physical element to the activity. The pupils were not supposed to sit on their chairs during this activity but were free to walk around the table to converse with their classmates and discuss the correct foods to place on the table. This part of the activity was not as successful as expected. An unpredictable behaviour among some children who sabotaged the other group by stealing some of the flashcards, caused frustration in some of the class members. It is noteworthy that the outcome of this activity was different when proposed in another class of twenty 10-year-old students. The fact that the other class was older probably helped them complete the assignment, and their prior group-working experience may have also contributed to the result.

Students were amazed by the fact that they knew how to say certain foods in English. After the activity, they started asking for the translation of additional dishes including pizza, pasta and sushi. The fact that some terms are not translated amused them and caused them to laugh and to experience positive feeling.

### **3.6.2. Food bingo**

Students were then given a grid containing 6 pictures with food and drinks that they had encountered during the storytelling and the earlier activities. The children received instructions on how to perform the activity in both English and Italian and the teachers gave them an example to give every student the chance to complete the task independently. This was crucial

to increase their self-esteem: perceiving themselves as proficient stimulates pupils and motivate them.

Pupils were also given 6 pieces of round-shaped red cardboards. As in the traditional version of the bingo game, the teacher picks a picture from her big pile of pictures and shows the image to the audience saying the name of the food. After that, students need to place a red dot on the corresponding picture on their grid. When all 6 pictures on the grid are marked with a red cardboard, the pupil needs to say “Bingo” and, with the help of the teacher, if necessary, he needs to repeat the name of the foods in his grid.

This activity is another form of repetition but with some variations concerning the pictures (simple and clear but diverse). This is a different presentation of the same foods introduced during the previous activities. This task allowed students to understand that the words they learned during the story and the former activities, were not only necessary to understand the story or to know what Nora ate during her meal, but they were also useful outside the context of the story.

This is a perfect example of an activity that does not require a significant linguistic effort from the students. Showing the picture and not only pronouncing the food, allowed every student, including the ones with special needs, to perform it independently and to give them the chance to check their answers.

### **3.6.3. The Shopping List**

This activity was thought of as an exercise dedicated to the group of students with special needs of the school. Originally, the objective of this activity was to increase the independence of these children in every-day activities, hoping that one day they would be able to complete them by themselves, without the help of another adult, a parent or a care giver. In the school room used as a library, support teachers recreated a supermarket with a cash desk, shelves with authentic boxes and bags from the supermarket, and even price tags.

During the activity, the teacher gave the students a grocery list. They were asked to follow it and do their shopping, looking for the products on the shelves. During the months which preceded the storytelling, the students with special needs consolidated how to carry out the activity in Italian. Once they were able to complete the task, the shopping list, translated into English, was proposed to the entire class. Students were divided into pairs and every couple

was given a different list of products to collect and a shopping bag. Here follows an example of a “Shopping list” proposed to the students.

### ***Shopping list***

*1 Banana*

*2 Apples*

*1 Juice*

*1 Milk*

*1 Tomato*

*4 Eggs*

To those students who proved to be fast and effective in completing their shopping, the teacher/teller proposed a second list written in italics. Since students were learning italics at the time of the activity, the different writing style was meant to challenge them and to make them use skills that they were learning during other lessons, which were not related to the English project. On the other hand, to help students in need, other lists were given where images were available next to the items.

#### **3.6.4. The Song**

In order to meet the need of those students who might have different types of intelligence, the storyteller proposed an activity that involved the use of a song. The objectives of this activity were to present and make use of the expressions “like” and “don’t like”, to learn how to give short answers to questions that start with “Do you like...?”, and to correctly use slang expressions such as “yummy” and “yucky”. In May 2023, the song “Do you like broccoli ice-cream”<sup>12</sup> was played during some unstructured moments such as break time and between lessons, to make the students to get to know it. This is helpful when it comes to children with special needs or students who have linguistic disorders. It is crucial to let them observe before gradually taking part in the choir when they feel ready (Daloiso and Favaro, 2021, p. 38). The song was chosen for the repetitive pattern that can help reinforce vocabulary and structure (Dujmović, 2006).

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frN3nvhIHUk>

Specifically, the song is about unlikely combinations between sweet and savoury foods, such as vegetables and sweets, which trigger the curiosity of the pupils and cause laughs in the audience, generating positive feelings in them. The piece chosen is a catchy song, the lyrics are repetitive and clearly pronounced by the singer. Every word is pronounced very distinctly and relatively slowly during the whole song. The lyrics and the song are performed by the singer during a video where images of foods and drinks appear whenever a food is appointed in the lyrics. After the first listening, the teacher started singing without the music and students were asked to repeat the lyrics after the teacher, to clap their hands following the beat so as to notice words and rhythm (Daloiso and Favaro, 2021, p. 38).

As a final group activity, students were asked to produce their own version of the song. First, students listened to the song again, and they were asked to sing along. After singing the song together, the students were informed that they needed to think about a food combination that they considered strange and, one at a time, they were asked to say these foods. The students were not asked to use exclusively the vocabulary learned in class nor to use exclusively English, but they asked for translation whenever they did not know the word in the FL. The activity was meant to verify if students had acquired and automatized the expressions linked to “like and dislike”, and how to ask and answer to the question properly, not to evaluate the number of foods that they remembered. Whenever a student used the Italian name of a food, the latter was translated by teachers and repeated by the classmates. The autistic pupil with special inclination for English, was consulted and students asked for her help during the activity. The teachers wrote down these food combinations on the blackboard and for every pair of foods, the class was invited to sing the song with the expressions that they had learned. Later on, students were asked to sing their version all together. Here follows an example verse of their song and some of the combinations that the students made during the activity: banana and pizza, chocolate and carrots, chicken and banana, pizza and avocado, yogurt and tomatoes, milkshake and fries.

Sample verse:

*Do you like banana?*

*Yes, I do.*

*Do you like pizza?*

*Yes, I do.*

*Do you like banana pizza?*

*No, I don't! Yucky!*

### **3.7. Reflections on the Storytelling Pilot Project**

In this final paragraph, some considerations around this storytelling project are briefly discussed, along with a few suggestions for further investigation.

Unlike adults, young learners are less motivated by instrumental reasons. They do not face the urgency of getting a job or enrol in higher education. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation might not be so present as their self-consciousness may be vaguer than that of adults, and still developing. This being said, young learners' motivation is mediated by a wide range of factors including the people involved in their FL learning. Indeed, teachers, parents, peers, learning activities, way of instructions, are part of the learning context and they can shape pupils' motivation (Li, Han and Gao, 2019). In the case of our pilot project, the teacher probably played a big role in students demotivation in learning English. As already mentioned, in 2022 the English teacher was also the physical education teacher and she frequently cancelled PE class in favour of focusing on English, without informing the other teachers or reviewing the day's schedule in advance. This caused frustration in the children who favoured PE class over English class, as well as in those who relied on the timetable being adhered to. This was perhaps one of the reasons why students lost enthusiasm. Students expressing frustration also had an impact on the teacher's emotions, as it demotivated her. Thanks to the storytelling project, it seems that students' attitudes towards English have started to change. First of all, an improvement in self-confidence among students who struggled in class and whose first language is not Italian was observed. This improvement was attested by an increase in the students' interventions during future English lessons to assist other students by providing extended responses to teachers' inquiries about colours and foods. To offer a concrete example, during an activity, one of these students stepped in after the audience responded "red" and provided a different response by adding "it's red," emphasising the start of his short observation. Although it may seem insignificant, correcting classmates in front of teachers requires a considerable amount of self-confidence as well as faith that your instructors and peers will not criticise you if you make a mistake.

It is important to recognise the limitations in the present study. The first limit of this research is the absence of a formal observation during the storytelling activities. Even if the observation of this class would not have had statistical relevance, an appropriate observation table,

completed by a teacher or by a third party, would have attested the outcomes of the storytelling activities, as well as the improvement of pupils' motivation. A prior survey would also have been useful in describing how the pupils initially felt about the foreign language and the environment. It is also important to mention that, because of the distinguishing features of the class, as the activity "What Do You Eat for Breakfast?" has shown, if these identical activities were carried out elsewhere, the outcome might be different. A triangular observation would have provided relevant data about the case study. The use of a camera is advised if someone wants to carry out a similar study in the future. It would be beneficial to record the class in order to observe the students' attitudes, focusing on one student at a time. Recording the storyteller would also be useful to monitor students' reactions to his/her verbal and non-verbal communication and it would help with the creation of upcoming storytelling sessions. Another limitation in this study concerns the absence of a questionnaire to investigate inclusion of pupils with special needs in the classroom.

An intriguing research topic would be to investigate students' motivation over time and to watch their attitude towards the English language in the next three years of primary school. However, unstable working conditions for teachers would preclude this type of research. The importance of getting to know the pupils is another advice for academics who are interested in this subject. During the planning of the activity, it became clear how important it was to understand the students' interests and potential sources of frustration as well as the need of understanding their nonverbal messages and body language. It was also crucial to comprehend the earliest phases of irritation in the kids with special needs. The ability to address potential sources of annoyance all year long played a role in the activities' overall successful conclusion as well as planning flexible activities that could have been adapted and changed as needed. In order to define appropriate activities to perform before, during, and after the storytelling, it would be beneficial to ask students what activities they prefer doing choosing from watching clips, listening to music, drawing, and writing.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conclusions**

This research was conducted to investigate the motivation dynamics among young language learners in an Italian primary school. The principal objective of this research was to determine the efficacy of storytelling activities as motivational instruments in a classroom context involving 13 students who exhibited a deficiency in motivation toward learning the English language. Additionally, a secondary research objective pertained to the evaluation of storytelling activities' potential in cultivating a more inclusive educational environment for students with specific needs within the class.

Throughout the course of this pilot project, the primary effort to stimulate motivation among students via storytelling activities is generally considered to have been achieved. This result was significantly influenced by the active roles assumed by teachers and educators, whose enthusiasm, and cooperation played a pivotal role in the planning and execution of these activities. As a result of these efforts, the teachers involved could observe a general improvement in students' motivation and self-confidence. The combination of engaging storytelling activities, educator support, and the promotion of an inclusive atmosphere created an environment where students generally felt empowered to express themselves and share their ideas. Students' enhanced self-confidence had positive effects within English classes, and in some cases, it also extended to leisure activities, other school subjects, and interactions with both teachers and adults within the school environment. Indeed, certain students, including those with special needs, encountered initial challenges in conversing with adults due to feelings of apprehension and insecurity. It is reasonable to assume that this storytelling project played a role in cultivating a more favourable perception of the adults involved. The overall improvement in motivation and self-confidence suggests the effectiveness of the storytelling activities and indicates the importance of a supportive educational environment in contributing to students' confidence and resilience. It can be assumed that the outcomes would have diverged, and the effectiveness of the activities would have diminished, had it not been for the positive attitude and enthusiasm exhibited by the teachers involved.

In general, the objective of creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for students with special needs through storytelling activities has been achieved. At the heart of this approach was a strong commitment to ensuring that every student, including those with

unique needs, felt valued and recognized, with a deep appreciation for their contributions. This commitment also extended to the customization of inclusive activities aimed at addressing the specific needs of these students that frequently required adjustments of the activity objectives and modification of the room setup. This approach ensured that the learning environment accommodated the diverse needs of all students, fostering a sense of inclusion and promoting a more cohesive class community.

To conclude, considering the limitations of this research and following the previously mentioned observations, this project has significantly advanced the understanding of the complex motivations that drive this particular group of young language learners. Furthermore, while the results of this research are limited to this specific class, it has provided additional information and strategies that can enhance future storytelling activities for this group, potentially benefiting other students as well. This study has risen questions which would deserve further investigation. Specifically, it would be intriguing to explore the students' perception of English as a foreign language after completing the storytelling activities using a questionnaire. Additionally, the outcomes of a systematic observation conducted by a different teacher, or a third party would have provided valuable insights for the case study. The use of a camera is recommended for future studies of a similar nature, as it would be advantageous for recording the classroom environment and observing students' attitudes, with a particular focus on individual students. While this study represents a modest addition to the broader field of research, we maintain the hope that the data and recommendations presented here will enrich our collective knowledge base and, as a result, prove advantageous to young learners in their educational journeys.



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