Very Young EFL Learners' Reactions to Different Assessing Methods

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SUMMARY

This paper focuses on methods of teaching and assessing very young learners' foreign language knowledge and skills. Learners are observed, a journal is kept about their reactions and progress during classes. Later on learners are grouped in different groups according to their speed of acquisition and interest in learning in order to see if their interest and speed of acquisition affect their method preferences. During the course, *Cookie and Friends Starter Pack* was used, and it is briefly described in order for the reader to understand the research better. A number of conclusions about teaching and assessing very young learners are drawn.

KEY WORDS: kindergarten learners, very young learners, assessing knowledge, EFL, language acquisition, English teaching, traditional teaching methods, innovative teaching methods.

SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad se fokusira na metode poučavanja i procjenjivanja znanja i vještina vrlo mladih učenika stranog jezika. Promatrali smo učenike, vodili dnevnik o njihovim reakcijama i napretku tijekom nastave. Kasnije su učenici grupirani u različite grupe prema njihovoj brzini usvajanja i interesu za učenje kako bi se uvidjelo utječu li njihov interes i brzina usvajanja znanja na metode kojima su skloni. Tijekom tečaja, korišten je *Cookie and Friends Starter Pack* koji je kratko opisan s ciljem da čitatelj bolje razumije istraživanje. Nekoliko zaključaka o poučavanju i procjenjivanju vrlo mladih učenika je donešeno.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: učenici vrtićke dobi, vrlo mladi učenici, procjena znanja, engleski kao strain jezik, usvajanje jezika, poučavanje

CONTENT

1. Introduction

In today's world everything is becoming faster. The same is happening with the education. Children are starting their education at an early age. English as Foreign Language (EFL) is also included in this acceleration and it is becoming usual for children to start learning English at the age of five or six in their kindergarten groups. Nowadays, this is still optional and only children who want to join English learning groups attend the classes, but in the future it can be expected for early learning of languages to become a standard in our country, too. Parents have always tried to secure their children's future, and in modern times it is very wise to invest in children's education in order for children to gain some advantages in future life.

Certainly, there are many advantages of early language learning, but nothing is ideal and new information should always be gained about the subject in order to find out if everything is as good as it seems. Sometimes there can be disadvantages to certain type of learning, and they can be noticed only after more profound observing. It is necessary to know to which methods learners respond or do not respond too well. Even though there are no grades in kindergarten, a teacher still needs to asses knowledge his or her learners have, and the way teacher assesses knowledge can change learners' view of the whole subject. Up until now not much attention has been paid to researching ways of assessing knowledge of young learners and researching learners' personal preferences of methods. The aim of this research is to contribute to this area. An overview of possible assessing methods will be given, and results of research of children's preferences will be shown.

The paper is divided into three different parts: the theoretical background and research part that is further divided into sections. The first section deals with assessing very young learners (VYLs) and the second gives an overview of the most appropriate methods for different types of learners. It is important to bring both of the information together because with VYLs teaching and assessing are very closely connected, and the borderline between the two is very hazy. In the theoretical background of this paper previous related research is presented, and its connection to this topic described. The research report brings a detailed description of aims, methodology and participants. Finally, results are presented and discussed.

2. Theoretical Background

The use of English has grown throughout Europe and much of the world. In recent years it has become very popular to start teaching English to children in kindergarten. Still, there is a lot left to say about this topic. Children in kindergarten are different than young learners in schools. "The term very young learners refers to children who have not yet started compulsory schooling and have not yet started to read. This varies according to the country and can mean children up to age of seven, so we have taken three to six years as a realistic average." (Reilly and Ward, 2003: 3). They are still developing, and their psychological profile is different than the profile of older children. VYLs are three to five or six years old. They are egocentric, subjective and dependent. Also, they are keen to communicate in order to differentiate themselves from the others. VYLs are likely to interrupt activities to gain attention. Most importantly, they have a very short attention span, and that affects their learning severely, but it also affects the way they should be taught.

Furthermore, the terms innovative and modern methods should be clarified. Different authors consider different methods to be traditional or innovative. Common ground of all different approaches to innovative vs. traditional teaching methods is the fact that all authors state that in traditional methods teacher is in the center, and in innovative methods teacher is merely a facilitator, and children are in the center. This means that in innovative methods children do many tasks on their own, with just a little help of a teacher. Also, innovative, or alternative methods, as they are sometimes called are defined by Pierce and O'Malley as "any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized or traditional test." (Pierce and O'Malley, 1992:2).

A research comparing three nations' young learners' language competence was done by Brumen et al. (2009). The research focuses on an international project involving empirical research into assessment of young learners' foreign language competence in Slovenia, Croatia and the Czech Republic. Using a questionnaire, data was collected from a nonrandom sample of primary and foreign language teachers who teach foreign language at the primary level in these countries. The research shows that the teachers are mostly young and that they most frequently use oral assessment, interviews or self-developed tests while assessing learners' knowledge. It is also stated that there are significant differences in teaching practice between Croatian, Slovenian and Czech.

Pavičić and Bagarić (2004) conducted research on focal points of assessment (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and spelling) and the language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in grades 1 to 3 and 4 to 6. In their report, the term VYLs is used to describe pupils in grades 1 to 3. In this research focus is primarily on teachers who were given a questionnaire through which they gave information about their experience in assessing knowledge of young learners. It is noted that Croatian teachers teaching young learners (1st to 6th grade) combine written and oral tests. Teachers use written tests more often with older young learners than with the VYLs. It is also stated that teachers choose different foci according to the classes they teach (e.g. grammar, spelling and writing).

Another research about kindergarten learners was done by Chan and Sylva (2006). In this study, the authors recognized the growing need for researching, identification and developing of appropriate English language methods with kindergarten children. The researchers tested several methods, but did not divide them into groups. They only observed results that were produced by different methods while comparing assessing methods standardized for first language (L1) and those standardized for second language (L2). A general finding of the study is that the selected L1 standardized assessment measures are appropriate for assessing L2 English language development of Hong Kong preschoolers, at least for that sample.

McLaughlin et al. (1995) offer advice on the assessment of the language development abilities of bilingual preschool children. In this guide, portfolio is mentioned as a good way for assessing knowledge of kindergarten learners. McLaughlin et al. state that the method used to assess the bilingual child's language abilities should be informal, based on performance samples and observations. Many authors seem to agree that kindergarten children should not be exposed to strict and formal assessment, but should instead be assessed informally and with a lot of caution not to stress them out. Also, the assessment is necessary for teachers to have feedback about the work they had done, and for the parents to be informed about the progress of their children.

Several aspects of children's language skills are important at different points in the process of literacy acquisition, and initially, vocabulary is important (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998:848). Having this in mind, this research is focused more on vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary knowledge assessment.

Vacc and Ritter (1995) give a review of the factors that can affect assessing knowledge of a VYL. Young children are considered to be difficult subjects to assess accurately because of their activity level and distractibility, shorter attention span, wariness of strangers, and inconsistent performance in unfamiliar environments. Cultural differences and language barriers, parents not having books to read to their child and a child's lack of interaction with other children may also affect a child's performance. Consequently, assessment of young children requires sensitivity to child's background. Also, knowledge of testing limitations and procedure with young children is necessary.

Since games are an important part of innovative methods it is important to give an explanation about the role of games in education. Hogle (1996) reviews the proposed benefits of using games as cognitive tools. Jacobs and Dempsey et al. (as cited in Hogle, 1996) state that "Games are classified into numerous, often overlapping, categories. A sampling includes: adventure games, simulation games, competition games, cooperation games, programming games, puzzle games, and business management games." In this case games are used as cognitive tools. As possible benefits of educational games Hogle states that games as educational tools can stimulate motivation and interest. These types of activities are also considered to be useful when trying to improve retention. Also, games are said to be good for practice and feedback. Hogle (1996) describes educational games, especially those that are computer-based as often designed in a drill and practice format, to the extent that some instructors grimly refer to them as 'the old drill and kill'. This format may be overused, but development of cognitive skills often requires long hours of practice with consistent feedback and it can be difficult to provide those conditions within a traditional classroom setting. This kind of activities are also considered to be good for improving higher order skills.

2.1. Characteristics of Very Young Learners

VYLs differ from other types of learners, even from young learners. They have not yet had any responsibilities in life and are still very playful. Most of them first say or do something and then think about it. VYLs are intellectually described as curious, easily distracted because of their short attention span. According to Miljković et al. (2003) that is logical because they cannot pay attention when their curiosity takes their attention to something else. Vasta et al. (1998) state that kindergarten learners are interested in *here* and *now*, and they learn by doing something. VYLs' cognitive skills are still developing and they have difficulty making decisions. Also, in area of language development Vasta et al. (1998) state that children usually first acquire a word's meaning and later on acquire semantic and grammatical rules. They do not need to learn sematic and grammatical rules, they notice them while listening to the people surrounding them. That is why social environment influences child's language development. Emotionally VYLs like to feel independent and need recognition. They are also very sensitive and expressive about feelings. Kindergarten learners need physical activity and are not able to sit down for long periods of time – they are active but tire easily. These children try to live up to adult expectations and are anxious to gain adult approval. Also, they show interest in adult activities. Generally they like group activities but are also very competitive and display seriousness during games. VYLs are often compared to sponges, meaning that they absorb language indirectly, subconsciously. Considering their development and sensitivity in many fields, while dealing with VYLs a lot of care and attention should be paid to the way one treats them.

2.2. Traditional Methods of Teaching and Assessing Very Young Learners

Traditional methods are considered to focus on the teacher and contain highly structured information. Frontal work, lectures, reading out loud, listening to a song without any additional task such as body movement are considered to be traditional methods. Also, being generally accepted and used for very long time makes this type of methods traditional, but also a bit outdated. The main feature of this kind of methods is the fact that learners are rather passive. Miljković et al. (2003) call this kind of teaching *direct teaching* and state that direct teaching is still the most widespread method of teaching. In this type of teaching the teacher transfers structured information to children by direct exposure or by demonstrating steps which should be followed by the learners in order to gain skills. Direct teaching is also known

as explicit teaching and didactical instructions. Table 1 shows overview of situations when it is suitable or inappropriate to use direct teaching according to Good and Brophy, and Gage and Berliner (as quoted in Miljković et al. 2003).

Table 1: When is the direct teaching suitable/inappropriate? (Miljković et al., 2003:335)

Direct teaching is inappropriate:	Direct teaching is suitable:
- when you are trying to accomplish application of knowledge or practicing skills	- when the main aim is presentation of facts and data
- when other sources of information are easily accessible	- when the matter is hardly available in other form
- when learners are heterogeneous considering previous knowledge	- when it is necessary to enhance interest for particular matter
- when the matter is abstract, complicated and full of details that learners need to remember	- when it is necessary to direct learners in the new matter
- when in order to accomplish aims of the class you need learners active participation	- when it is necessary to summarize matter from multiple sources

According to Arends (as quoted in Miljković et al. 2003) stages of direct teaching are: explaining the aim and motivating learners for learning, elaboration of the new matter and/or presenting skills, guided practice and following learner's performance, evaluation of understanding, and additional practice and ensuring the transfer of knowledge from short term memory to long term memory.

Traditional methods include: chanting, questions and answers, naming and pointing. Simply said, chanting is repeating. VYL accept chanting very well, and it can be good method for teaching vocabulary but it also has its downsides such as mispronouncing a word and therefore, after repeating it many times, a child learns the wrong pronunciation that is caused by the chant. Later on it is hard to correct the wrong pronunciation so teachers should be careful when using chanting. It would be best to make sure all of the learners know how to pronounce word correctly before introducing a chant. The simplest method used – questions and answers – implies asking a child a question and he or she needs to answer it. Naming an

object is also often used in teaching. Learners need to name something they see – whether it is an object or a picture. Pointing is also a very common method in teaching, especially in language teaching. A child needs to point to something the teacher or other children name. Traditional methods are sometimes considered simpler than innovative, and children sometimes find them boring. Boredom is often a problem in modern classrooms because children today are used to a lot of savors and need them constantly. That is a consequence of a modern way of living and the technology children are exposed to.

2.3. Innovative Methods of Teaching and Assessing Very Young Learners

Innovative methods are considered to focus on children. Songs and games are motivating to children. Teaching of a target language through songs and games is an interesting way to get the most from the children because this is one of the things children generally like to do. Therefore it motivates them to learn. In the case of innovative methods the teacher is only an enabler, and his/her role is only to help and guide children during their independent work. Opposite to traditional methods and direct teaching is teaching by guided discovery and conversation. This type of teaching is thought to be founded by the Greek philosopher Socrates. Miljković et al. (2003) relies on John Bruner when stating the importance of learning by discovering, inductive reasoning and discussion. The main aim of the learning by discovery is said to be helping the learner to ask questions and looking for answers and solutions that will satisfy his curiosity. Though innovative methods in this research paper do not include only teaching by led discovery and conversation, but also different games and total physical response (TPR) activities, these methods are also very important part of the group of innovative methods.

There are also games as innovative methods defined by Hogle (1996) as an activity that must include several basic characteristics. Game is usually a contest of physical or mental skills and strengths, requiring the participant(s) to follow a specific set of rules in order to attain a goal. These activities may involve an element of chance or fantasy. A game involves competition with others, with a computer, or with oneself. According to Bright and Harvey, Dempsey et al. and Malone (as cited in Hogle 1996), games can be instructional or not, they can be interactive or not, and they can be computer-based or not. In the past it was considered inappropriate to play a lot of games as a part of learning process in school, but nowadays it is

encouraged. Children learn faster and with a lot of joy during games. It is easier to motivate children by including games in teaching process, too. The description of methods follows.

Innovative methods include some of the following methods: Chinese whisper, picture dictation and different TPR activities. Chinese whisper (sometimes called Chinese telephone) is a game which is very good for practicing vocabulary knowledge. It is based on whispering from one person to another. Picture dictation is a drawing activity. Teacher describes simple and easy to draw picture to learners. While listening, learners need to draw what the teacher is saying. This activity is very successful with VYL who are happy to draw, but it is necessary to repeat sentences at least three times, sometimes even up to five times. TPR activities, as the name says include total physical response. This is actually a group of activities which includes dancing to songs and chants, touching a body part or item of clothing when it is mentioned and moving from station to station when a word is mentioned. Going from station to station is group activity in which flashcards are put around classroom and when a certain word is mentioned learners need to go to the station on which the flashcard with that word is displayed.

In order to teach using innovative methods, there are some characteristics of a classroom that need to be met as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Classroom surroundings focused on children vs. usual classroom surroundings (Glasser, 1990)

CLASSROOM SURROUNDINGS FOCUSED ON CHILDREN	USUAL CLASSROOM SURROUNDINGS
Furniture • chairs are around tables in order to encourage interaction among children • comfortable areas for work	**Furniture** • chairs and tables are arranged in rows, learners sit one behind the other looking at the backs of one another
Walls • works of the learners • proof of cooperation among learners • different lists, statements, symbols	**Walls** • empty • decorated with commercial posters • poster with consequences of bad

made by learners and not teachers • information and memories about visitors to class or about excursions, visits outside the classroom, about significant events in the classroom	behavior • rules for behaving made up by adults • records showing awarding and/or ranking of learners • learners' works are exhibited, but they are suspiciously perfect, only by the best learners, almost all look the same
Sounds • humming of the voices of learners exchanging ideas is often heard	**Sounds** • long silent periods and/or teachers' voice as the loudest or the one heard most often
Position of the teacher • it is usual for him/her to be working with the students so it takes some time for us to notice him/her	**Position of the teacher** • typically in front of the learners or in the center
Voice of the teacher • honest, warm, respectful	**Voice of the teacher** • controlling and commanding • uncutuous
Reactions of learners to visitors • welcoming, ready to explain or present their work immediately or use the visitor as a source of information	**Reactions of learners to visitors** • indifferent or hopeful (happy) that the work will be interrupted
Tasks • different activities are done simultaneously	**Tasks** • all learners are doing the same task

Miljković et al. (2003) compared direct teaching and discussion method. They conclude that the best approach for knowing facts during exams is direct teaching. The discussion method is considered better than direct teaching for developing attitudes and motivation for learning, and long – term knowledge and processing knowledge. This implies that no teaching method

should be excluded from classes, and in order for learners to achieve the maximum, teaching methods should be balanced.

Table 3. Overview of Innovative and Traditional Assessment Approaches

Innovative approach to assessment	Traditional approach to assessment
- permanent and cumulative	- occasional
- open questions are used	- multiple choices questions
- based on observing different activities in different circumstances	- based on one type of activities
- relies on criteria	- relies on prescribed norms
- learners participate in assessing their peers	- only the teacher assesses

Miljković et al. (2003) describes assessment approaches for older learners, but the characteristics can be transferred to VYLs, too. In innovative approach permanent and cumulative approach is necessary in order for teacher not to lose sight of his or her learners' progress. Some characteristics of traditional approach that are mentioned in Table 3 need to be combined with VYLs because they are not always competent to answer open questions. With VYLs there are not yet strict criteria or norms except for the ones teachers prescribe themselves. Since VYLs are still very subjective it is hard to have them participating in assessing their peers. Teaching VYLs combines characteristics from both innovative and traditional assessment approaches.

Theoretical articles and books related to VYL are rather rare if compared to literature relating to other groups of learners. Many more authors concentrate on writing about older groups of learners because they are more familiar with that kind of work, or simply because there are more learners in schools than there are VYLs, especially in countries like Croatia where learning a second language in kindergarten is still optional. What follows is the report on empirical research whose purpose is to contribute to this area.

3. Very Young EFL Learners' Reactions to Different Assessing Methods: Research Report

3.1. Aims and Research Questions

The present study explores which assessing methods VYLs respond to best – i.e. during which tasks they show their knowledge most realistically, without confusions and without using their cognitive strength on focusing on understanding the tasks. Potential differences between learners' preferences of methods considering their interest in learning English and speed of language acquisition are also researched. We were interested in finding out whether there were any differences in methods preferences among VYLs considering those two factors, and potentially identifying reasons to particular learners' preferences.

The main research questions are the following:

- What are the most appropriate methods for assessing VYLs' knowledge of EFL?

- Are there any differences in preferred assessing methods between VYLs who are interested in learning English and those who are not interested in learning English and if so what are they?

- Are there differences in preferred assessing methods between "fast acquirers" and "slow acquirers" and if so what are they?

3.2. Procedure

The participants were thirteen children aged five or six. They will be described in more detail in section 3.4. At this point, it is important to state that not all of the children were equally developed cognitively or physically. The research was conducted by keeping a personal diary during ten 45 minute-long classes noting learners' knowledge and reactions to certain methods (liking or disliking, amusement or boredom). Diary entries included comments on learners' progress, behavior during classes and emotional state of the children. Development of the language competence of the group and their knowledge acquisition was followed – firstly as individuals, and later as a group. Children were taught using different methods, some of them traditional, and some innovative. Most of the tasks focused on vocabulary presentation and practice. In those ten classes vocabulary knowledge of two topics (body parts and clothes) were introduced, practiced and assessed. The two topics were rather closely

connected, and it was easy to recycle previous vocabulary (colors and numbers) while teaching the new vocabulary.

After having presented the new vocabulary to children, the words were practiced with them for next two to three classes. When the practicing was over the assessment started. None of the children knew they were being assessed therefore there was no pressure. Learners thought they were playing a game or simply talking to their teacher, while actually they were being assessed.

Usually the traditional methods are used first because they are considered easier. Frontal work was used during presentation of vocabulary. During classes we combined traditional methods with innovative methods. Several assessment methods were tried out – questions and answers, showing a flashcard to learners and asking them to say what object is in the picture, asking them to name all the words they could remember and playing *Touch…* game. While assessing knowledge during the questions and answers activity, the teacher would ask learners if they could say a word in English. For example: "Gabriel, can you tell me *majica*[1] in English?" and Gabriel would answer: "T-shirt." Another method was showing learners a flashcard with a picture of an object and they would name it. Sometimes learners would need to find a flashcard for a word that they heard. For example: "Find trousers." In *Touch…* game learners needed to touch the body part or item of clothing that was named.

While using TPR as assessment two or three children would be asked to do the task alone while the rest of the group was drawing or doing other task from the book. This way the learners assessed felt special, but not pressured because they had support from their peers who were doing the same action. Yet it was possible to notice if a child was only copying what others were doing and did not actually acquire the vocabulary knowledge.

After making notes on all of the learners for all of the classes, during the analysis phase, children were grouped according to their interest in learning and participating, and according to their language acquisition speed. The grouping was done on the basis of personal notes. Groups that children are put in are not equal in numbers because sometimes it would not be realistic, and it was not the number that was important, but the relationship between groups and different methods. This will be described in more detail in section 3.4. In the next section the book used during classes is described and analyzed.

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[1] *majica* means a T shirt in English

3.3. Analysis of the Model Book "Cookie and Friends A, Teacher's Guide"

The model book "Cookie and Friends A, Teacher's Guide" was already analyzed by Carchipulla and Pulla (2010) who analyzed its weaknesses and strengths. The book consists of six units, as shown in Figure 1.
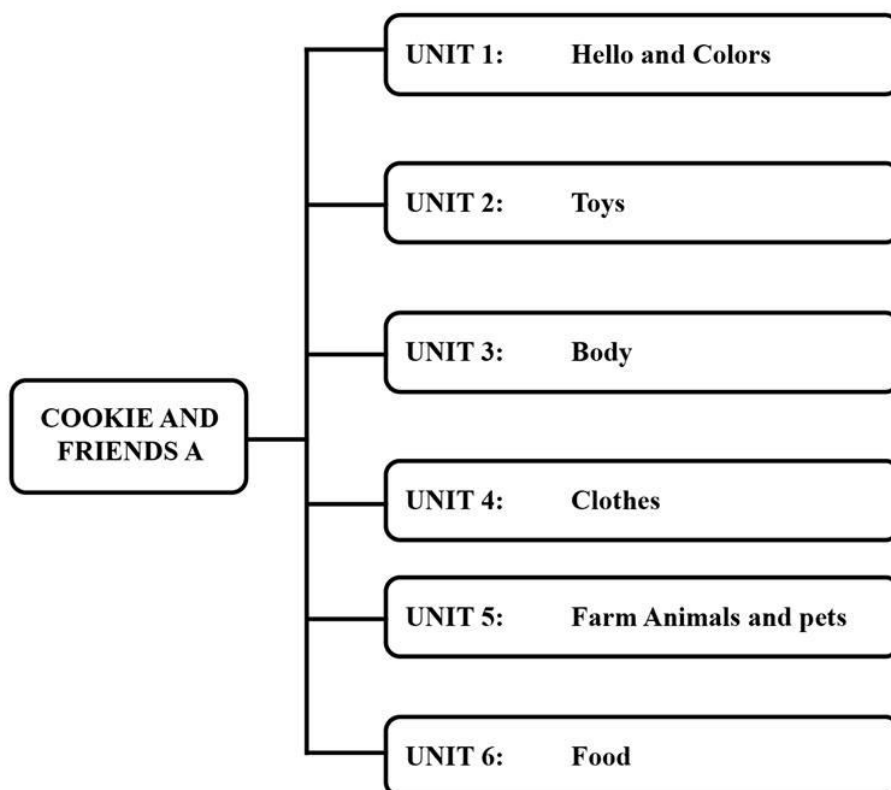

Figure 1: Cookie and Friends Units (Carchipulla and Pulla, 2010:26)

Units are arranged on the basis of vocabulary, from the most familiar and closest to more abstract and not so familiar. All of the units are reinforced with songs, chants, games, coloring tasks, tracing tasks and drawing tasks in both - the book and during the classes observed in our research. Tasks follow units logically, too.

We agree with Carchipulla and Pulla that there are some weaknesses in the book, such as songs that are not particularly interesting to children, and sometimes children find the songs too hard to sing along. Unlike Carchipulla and Pulla, we feel that there are enough songs in the book. More songs would make learners who are not prone to music dissatisfied with classes. On the other side, Carchipulla and Pulla consider there to be too few songs and felt the need to add extra songs to their lesson plans. Carchipulla and Pulla also find that there

were not enough fun activities, to which partially agree. Some units lacked games so different games and activities were included on our own.

What children like the most in the Cookie Starter Pack is the Cookie hand puppet which is interesting to children because it is a puppet, and they get a feeling they are playing. Also, a feeling of honor is presented to a child that gets to hold Cookie the Cat as a reward for doing a task very well. The puppet motivates learners to engage themselves in the learning process and to try harder. Each lesson has short stories that are simple and easy to follow and comprehend while acquiring new vocabulary.

We find that the Cookie Starter Pack is actually a good choice for teaching VYLs. It does have its disadvantages, but there are still many advantages to it that benefit the learning process. Children like their books and find the activities nice, and stories comprehensive. Some of them did not like the singing, but that is something that is a characteristic of the group, and is not connected to the book. All in all, Cookie Starter Pack is a very good kindergarten material for teaching English to children that had not encountered learning English before.

3.4. Participants

The participants of this research were thirteen children. There were nine girls and four boys in the group. All of the participants were five or six years old. Not all participants were equally intellectually or physically developed, and as usual, not all of them showed the same amount of motivation and interest in learning the language. Therefore, their progress varied, too. Also, almost none of the children knew how to read or write. At the time of research a few of the children knew how to spell their names and some other letters, but with mistakes. What follows is a short general description of every participant. The descriptions include observations of children as learners of their disabilities, if there were any, and their emotional state if it seemed to affect their learning.

It has been noticed during this research that VYLs are generally very emotional and dependent. They are in constant need for attention and have the wish to say something. Children are affected by their parents' relationships, talks with their peers and other everyday events. Sometimes their overreaction to a certain remark is a consequence to situation at home or a fight they had with a friend earlier that day. Also, it has been noticed that children who

are dealing with certain troubles have shorter attention span and require more guidance from the teacher. Most of the learners have bad days and need help with dealing with them, but usually those are typical childish problems such as not being able to play with the toy they wanted or not liking the food that is served that day. Being faced with bigger problems such as parents' divorce or death of a family member causes bigger difficulties for a child. As a consequence, he or she starts to show some signs of lack of attention, such as crying for no reason, yelling at their peers, trying to be the loudest during a game, being especially sensitive to losing in a game, or simply trying to disrupt the class. The difference between VYLs and older learners is in their emotional. Also, there are some very playful individuals and it is hard to motivate them to participate in the classes. These children do not yet have the sense of responsibility that is developed while going to school. They are used to playing games, singing or drawing and are just beginning to understand that there are times they need to be more focused than usually.

3.4.1. Description of Individual Participants

Jane, a female participant, did not show much interest in learning during most classes. She was rather playful and would get distracted easily. Sometimes it was necessary to warn her in order to regain her attention. Still, she did not have any problems with learning as fast as the other participants did. This is a rather rare case when interest does not affect learners' progress. It is possible that a different approach such as individual work is better solution for this participant and that using a different approach may help this learner to progress even faster than she did. In many diary excerpts Jane is described as "not interested, looking for toys nearby to play with, yet when asked a question she would be able to answer".

David showed a lot of interest in learning during all classes. He was always very keen to participate, tried to calm down other children if they were restless. In our diary notes David is mainly described as very interested, helpful towards teacher and learners and cooperative. This participant progressed very quickly, acquiring knowledge very fast. His interest and curiosity motivated him to learn, to be concentrated and to ask questions.

Polly was one of the most uninterested children in the group. She was very playful, very often trying to disrupt the class or even declining to cooperate with the rest of the group. Accordingly, her progress was very slow. It is possible that the problem was in her age, since she was the youngest member of the group. Notes about Polly usually included comments

about her playing with nearby toys, talking, disrupting other children, even being rude a couple of times. When given the opportunity to show her progress she would usually fail to show any.

Rocco differed from other children, he was very competitive but he also had big oscillations in his motivation for participating in class. His competitiveness motivated him to show interest, but he would be rather uninterested if there was no opportunity for him to compete with other children in some way. Still, it can be said that he was more interested than the rest of the group generally was. When he was interested he acquired language very fast, but when he was not interested in the topic he was very slow. On average he still belongs to the group of children that acquired knowledge fast. Excerpts about Rocco varied because of his tantrums during classes when he was not interested.

Mark was one of the most challenging participants in the group. He suffered from speech defect, not being able to pronounce many of the sounds. Since this class was focused on vocabulary and teaching children how to pronounce the words correctly it was very difficult for Mark to be on the equal level as his peers. Yet, when assessing knowledge without participants pronouncing the words (using flashcards or real objects) Mark showed some progress. Sometimes his speech defect demotivated him and he would lose interest, and he was not especially interested to begin with. This puts him in the group of less interested and slower acquiring children.

Tina was the second youngest member of the group. It was very obvious she was not interested in the classes. She would sometimes even say that she did not want to be in the class. Her playfulness prevented her from concentrating, and therefore her progress was very slow. "Tina disrupted the class again today. After she was asked why she was being rude she replied she was bored and wanted to go home."

Nora was another challenging participant. She suffered from cerebral paralysis and was not able to walk. She also had problems with moving her hands which prevented her from drawing or coloring properly. This meant that she was not able to finish coloring tasks during class and usually finished them at home. Many of the methods included TPR, sometimes even dancing, and this was a challenge for Nora but usually the activities were adapted for her. Also, she was not very interested in learning, and her progress was very slow, sometimes she was not able to acquire the knowledge at all and the group would be forced to proceed with new lessons without her knowing the previously taught vocabulary. Besides her physical

condition she also had trouble with pronouncing some words, even when she was repeating after someone and that was an additional difficulty in her language acquisition.

Ana was very interested in learning, often asking questions and trying to learn more than necessary. Accordingly, she progressed very fast. Sometimes it confused other children to see how far ahead Ana was, and to see that she knew a lot more of English words. Sometimes her knowledge motivated others to be curious and try to learn more vocabulary. In the diary Ana is continually described as persistent to learn something new, interested and polite.

Gabriel was not interested in learning English. Generally, he did not show any interest in any of the topics or methods used and he socialized only with certain children. He progressed very slowly partially because of his lack of interest and partially because of his reluctance to speak in front of his peers. It is noted that "Gabriel has trouble socializing, does not show much interest in classes and is often teased by his peers. It takes him a bit longer than other children to learn a new word."

Ellen was very interested in learning. She stated on several occasions that she was practicing pronunciation at home with her parents, and that helped her progress very much. Even without working at home she acquired knowledge rather fast. Generally, Ellen was usually positively described. Her progress was visible from class to class.

Monica varied from very interested to uninterested. Monica's parents warned us that Monica was going through difficult time with her family and that influenced the level of her interest. Generally, if we ignore the outside factors Monica could be put in the group with interested children because when she was not dealing with problems at home she was very interested. Just as her interest, her progress varied, but again if the outside factors were ignored, Monica could be considered a *fast acquirer*. Notes about Monica varied, depending on her emotional state. On the days she felt happy she was more concentrated and visibly carefree. When she felt troubled she would daydream and stop keeping attention easily

Sarah usually showed an average interest – neither interested, nor uninterested but as classes were progressing she was becoming less and less interested. She progressed in the same way. The classes were never disturbed by her and she always did her tasks timely, but she had trouble concentrating and sometimes she would not pay attention to what the teacher was saying and that affected her progress, too. Her progress was affected by her absences that were more often than with the other children.

Mary was very interested in classes. She always wanted to know more and she studied a lot at home with her parents so sometimes she knew a lot more than her peers did. She progressed very quickly.

3.4.2. Criteria for Grouping Participants

Being interested in learning a foreign language meant that a child shows signs of curiosity, needs and wishes to learn, and at least tries to stay concentrated on tasks given to them. Sometimes it is hard for VYLs to stay concentrated for a long time, but there are children who try to stay concentrated, and those who lose interest in task after very little time. Being put in a group of not interested children does not mean anything negative, but only indicates that a child has different interests and appetence. Since the classes that were observed were in November, we were able to get to know children before the research started and notice their reactions to different actions. This way it was less confusing what a child felt towards a task – we had gotten to know them before. For example, a journal note from a class is: "Today Rocco did not want to cooperate. He has already memorized all of the vocabulary and he finds the tasks boring, and not challenging enough." Hadn't we been familiarized with the way Rocco reacted when he previously acquired knowledge, he might have been considered uninterested. Another example is Polly who was continually noted as playful, and not paying attention to the class, usually being happier when a class was over than during the class. Ana, on the other hand showed a lot of interest in tasks and all of the vocabulary taught. It was noted multiple times that: "Ana asked for extra task and wanted to learn more words than were presented/practiced." Usually if certain information about a learner was repeated it affected the way he or she was profiled and grouped in the end.

Speed of acquisition is measured by times that a word needed to be repeated in order for a child to learn it. Repetition included repeating after teacher, looking at flashcards and naming the items in the pictures, listening to songs and playing games that included saying a word. If a child was not able to learn a new vocabulary item after ten to twelve different repetitions he/she was considered a slow learner. Interest in learning, cognitive abilities and the topic of the unit sometimes affect children's speed of acquisition. Gabriel is a great example for interest affecting learning because he did not have any cognitive disabilities but was only uninterested and uncommunicative. It was repeatedly noted that "Gabriel did not acquire any

of the vocabulary, he is only able to repeat after the teacher. Even while repeating he shows signs of discomfort and is not happy to speak."

3.4.3. Grouping the Participants

After analyzing the diary, children were grouped into two groups. Table 4 shows how the participants were grouped according to their interest in learning English and speed of acquiring knowledge using the criteria described earlier.

Table 4: Grouping the Participants

	Fast Acquirers	Slow Acquirers
Interested Learners	David, Rocco, Ana, Ellen, Monica, Mary	
Uninterested Learners	Jane	Polly, Mark, Tina, Nora, Gabriel, Sarah

After comparing the groups it can be noticed that children interested in learning were also grouped as fast acquirers. The only exception is Jane who is a proof that there is always an individual challenging the rule.

3.5. Results

In this research there are different but closely related research questions. First, the most appropriate methods for assessing VYLs knowledge of EFL is explored. Preferences in teaching and assessing methods between VYLs according to their interest and speed of acquisition are researched. While researching VYLs' language acquisition it is necessary to research teaching and assessing knowledge simultaneously because assessing knowledge is done implicitly. There is no direct assessment as teachers usually do in schools because children should not be pressured, and a lot is done in order for them to feel relaxed and more confident. Assessment is done in order for teachers to know if children are progressing and how fast.

Results emanating from this research corroborated our expectations. Interested learners progress faster than the learners that are not as interested. Methods preferences in some cases

differ from group to group and sometimes the results are inconclusive. The most obvious result is that children interested in learning English prefer innovative methods. Other results were not as obvious but it was possible to reach conclusions from them, too. A more detailed overview of the results follows. Excerpts from the diary are in quotation marks.

3.5.1. Results of Research of Methods for Assessing VYL's Knowledge of ESL

Sometimes children would be bored while traditional methods were used: "Sarah did not keep eye contact during the presentation of vocabulary today. She kept looking around the room, and tried to have fun in different ways." On the other hand there were learners who were very happy after finding out that new vocabulary will be presented. "After telling children that today we were going to learn some new words Rocco was so happy that he came to hug me." Chanting as a traditional method did not cause boredom among children because they found it funny to hear words spoken fast. "Chanting body parts while using the chant from the book made children laugh. They found it funny how all of the words sounded when spoken all together." Also, while chanting sometimes different words were emphasized and that made children more concentrated, they needed to follow which word would be emphasized next. Sometimes they were asked to clap their hands while pronouncing the emphasized word. Questions and answers are perceived by VYLs as very competitive task. In case of a child not knowing the answer to a question other children would either mock him/her or be angry with the learner. "Today we practiced questions and answers. Mark was not able to answer question he was asked because he did not know how to pronounce the word. David and Rocco immediately started mocking him and saying he was a baby". It was similar with naming. If a child was not able to name the object in the picture, the other children were judgmental. Usually learners did not notice the difference between questions and answers and naming as assessment methods because these were individual tasks, and the rest of the learners would listen and wait for their turn.

Innovative Methods included dancing to songs and sometimes children who do not like dancing were very reluctant to participate in the task. "Rocco did not want to dance while listening to *The Body Song* claiming that dancing is only for girls and that he was a boy. Some other boys wanted to follow his example, but they changed their minds after being asked by the teacher to continue dancing." Chinese whisper was one of children's favorite games. They were divided into two or three groups and one learner from each group was chosen to come to

the teacher and hear a word. After counting to three all of the learners that got the word from the teacher went back to the group and whispered the word on until the last child heard it. The group whose last member shouted the word correctly first was the winner of the game. Learners always wanted to play another round. "Today two rounds of Chinese whisper were planned. Children were so thrilled that they wanted to play three more rounds." Another activity that was well accepted was TPR because children enjoy movement and love the change from sitting position. The activity of touching a body part when it was mentioned was very popular. This activity helped learners to successfully learn all of the body parts. They did not practice pronunciation here, but they very successfully acquired meaning of the words this way. Chinese whisper was not used as an assessment method because it was a group work, and it was used only for practicing listening skills and pronunciation. Generally it can be said that VYLs find innovative methods more fun and more challenging than the traditional methods, but for slower acquirers innovative methods can be too challenging and they can lose pace with other children.

3.5.2. Results of Research of the Best Methods for Teaching VYLs

In the end it can be noted that the most realistic results came from methods that were previously known to children. During one assessment we asked children to do a picture dictation. All of the children got confused, they were not certain what to do, and they were not able to show the knowledge we knew they had acquired. Here is a short excerpt about the picture dictation from the diary: "After explaining the picture dictation task to the learners for the third time there were still some learners who did not understand what they needed to do. It was decided to let them try the task anyway and see if they would realize while looking at their peers. Some of them did not realize what to do until the end of the task". VYLs are still cognitively underdeveloped for tasks such as picture dictation that require higher cognitive skills.

After following learners through classes, the notes about them were compared and analyzed. Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5 show a cumulative conclusion according to groups and considering methods. Figure 2 shows that the group of learners interested in learning English mostly like traditional methods.
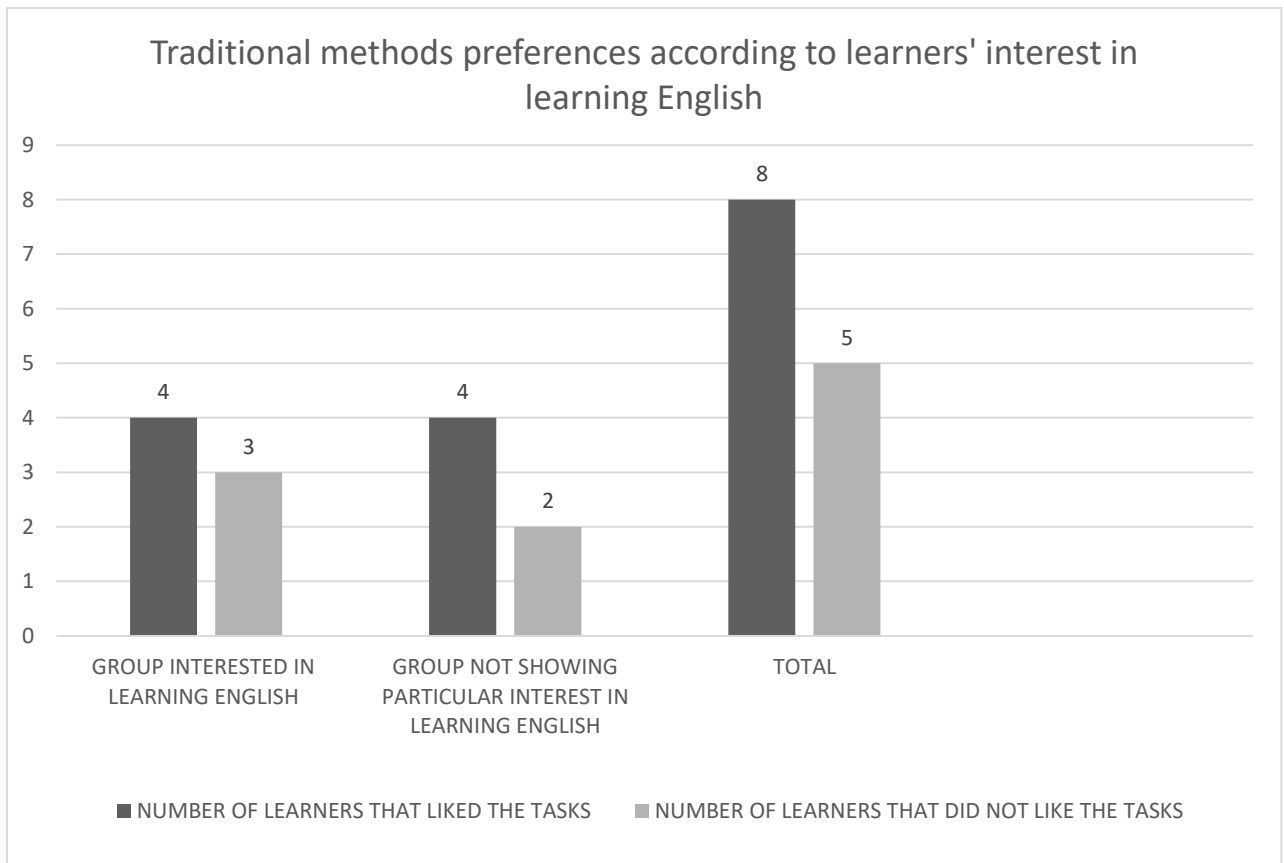
Figure 2: Overview of traditional methods preferences according to learners' interest in learning English

On the other hand, if the above numbers are compared with the numbers from Chart 3, it can be noticed that they greatly preferred innovative methods. It is obvious because there were no children interested in learning English that disliked innovative methods. In the other group, i.e. learners not showing particular interest in learning English, there was a significant level of disliking of innovative methods. Later on some of the possible reasons for these results will be discussed.
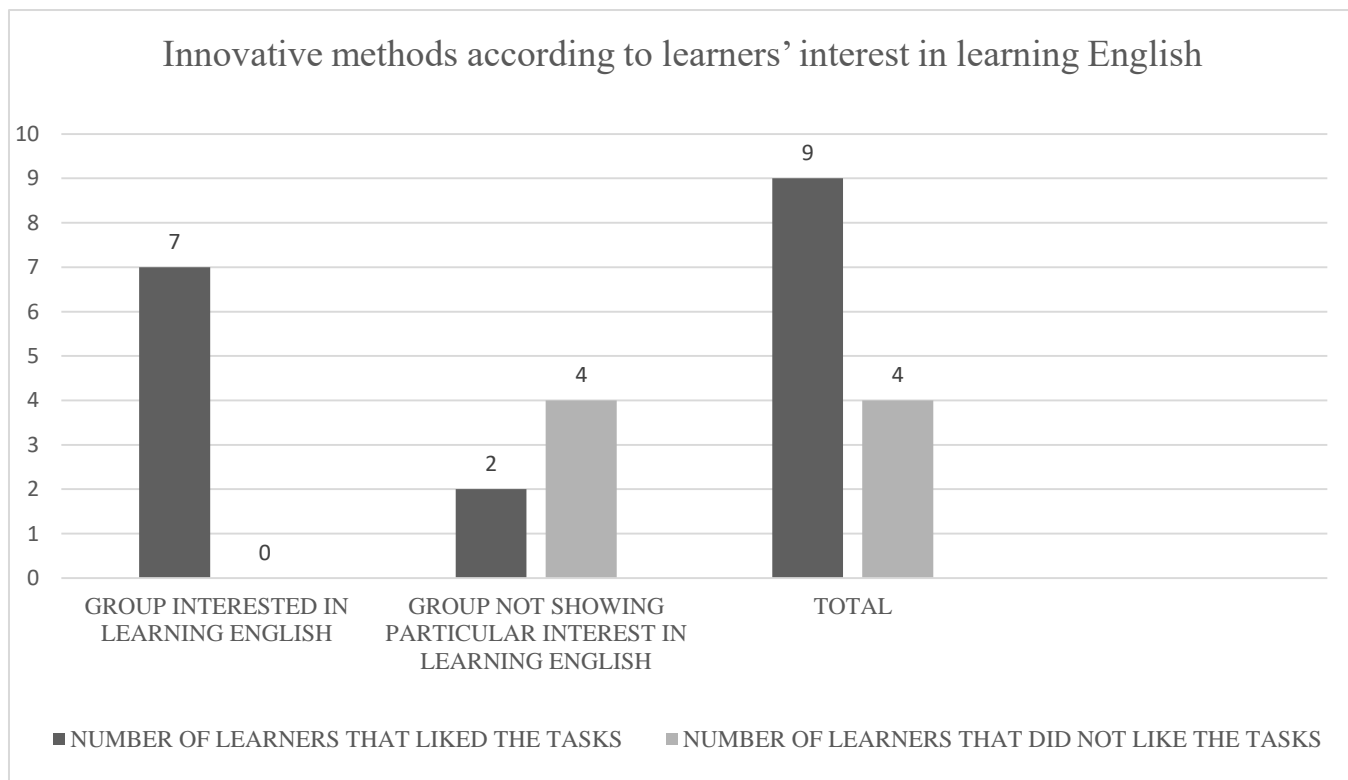
Innovative methods according to learners' interest in learning English

- NUMBER OF LEARNERS THAT LIKED THE TASKS
- NUMBER OF LEARNERS THAT DID NOT LIKE THE TASKS

Figure 3. Overview of innovative methods preferences according to learners' interest

While the first two charts show VYLs' preferences according to their interest in learning English, the last two charts show their preferences according to their speed of language acquisition. In these two figures it can be seen that VYLs who acquire knowledge faster are more prone to innovative methods, and slower acquiring learners are more prone to traditional methods. Some of the learners that were considered to be less interested in English were also put in the slower acquiring group so that can be a reason for similar results, but there are many more potential explanation of this result. For example, interest in a certain topic may have influenced learners' motivation and, consequently, motivation has affected acquisition of knowledge. Emotional state of learners also affects their acquisition, and in sometimes a different approach such as more individual work, or more group work could influence a child's acquisition.
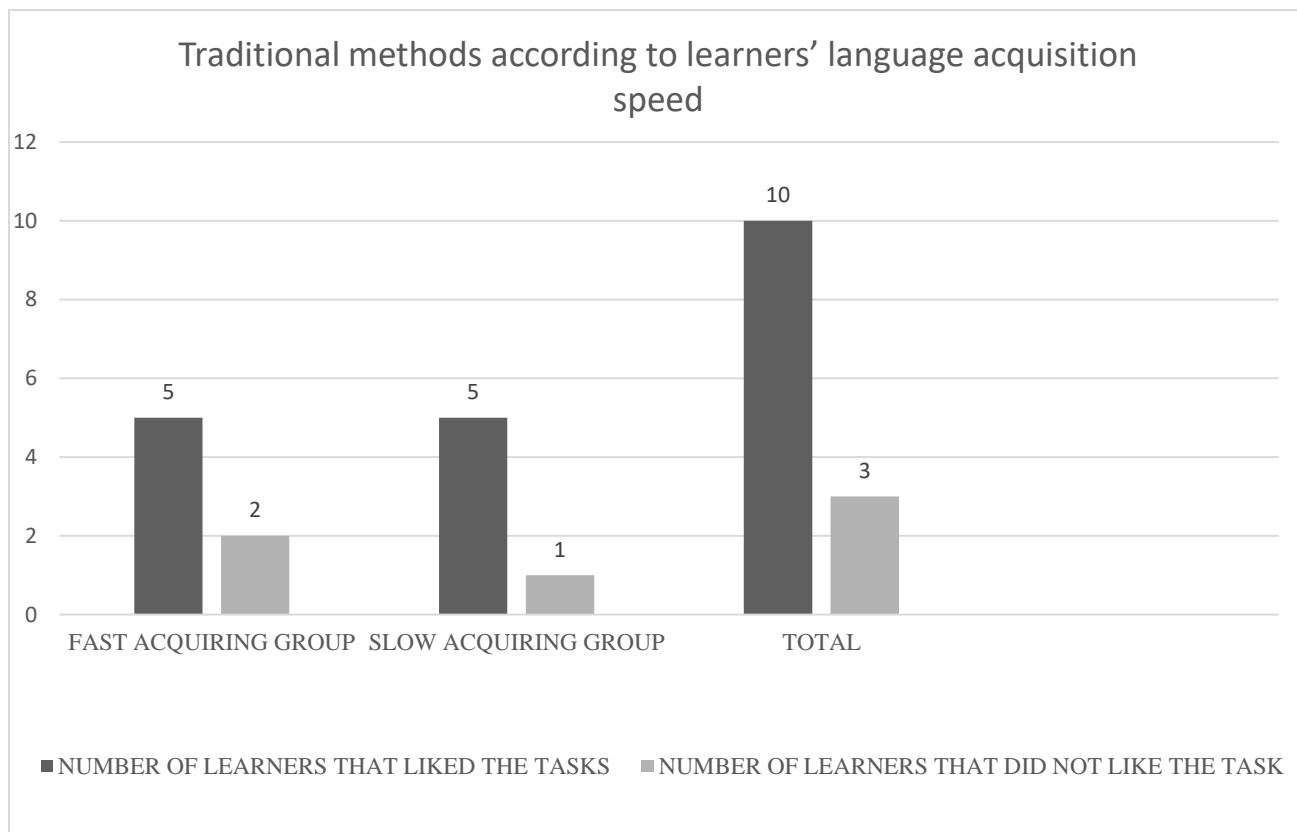
Figure 4. Overview of traditional methods preferences according to learners' language acquisition speed

Figure 4 shows that the same number of fast acquirers and slow acquirers liked traditional methods used. They managed to do all of them because they were previously familiarized with the methods since they are used during their everyday kindergarten activities. Children that did not like the tasks mostly disliked them because those learners were generally not inclined to these types of method. Still, it was easier for slow acquiring group to follow traditional methods because they were familiarized with the process and they were able to focus on their vocabulary knowledge more. Number of fast acquiring learners liking innovative methods is significantly higher than the number of slow acquiring learners liking innovative methods, as figure 5 shows.
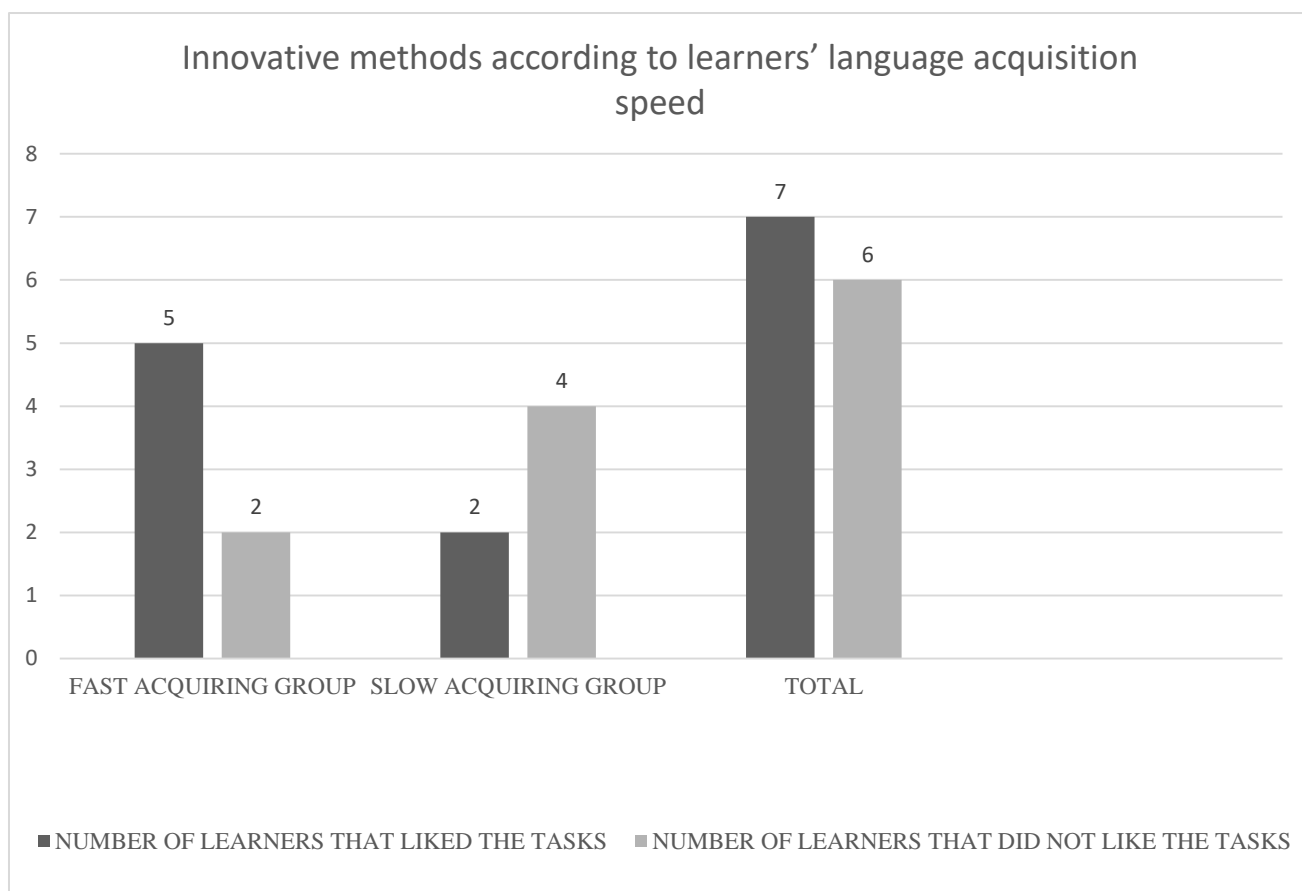
Figure 5. Overview of innovative methods preferences according to learners' language acquisition speed

Since VYLs do not know how to read most of the tasks included speaking, pointing or TPR activities. These types of tasks were problematic for Mark and Nora who had their own problems with these types of tasks (speaking difficulties and walking disability), but they were able to participate in the tasks if it was adapted. For example, since Nora cannot walk, while doing TPR activities we would individualize the task for her and give her specific instructions. For example, if the other children were walking around from station to station in a game, Nora would be asked to crawl with them. Since she can crawl very fast there were no difficulties that way. In some tasks jumping was required, and Nora would be allowed to think of an alternative and instead do the action she thought of herself. While doing tasks in which children practiced pronunciation, and Mark was not able to participate in full capacity, the task was individualized for him. Fore example, he was asked to pronounce easier words, or sometimes allowed to choose a word he would like to pronounce so it would not be humiliating for him to try and not be able to pronounce a word.

3.6. Discussion

There are several factors that need to be considered while contemplating this topic. Firstly, innovative methods might seem more challenging, and that may be the reason why children who are *better* at English (more interested, faster acquirers) prefer this kind of methods, and learners who are a bit behind prefer traditional methods because these methods are more relaxed, and learners are used to working that way. Next, there are some other possible problems that are worth considering. It is possible that results are a bit subjective - that some children were subjectively put in a certain group. Unfortunately, we were not in a position to do more detailed research – measure children's motivation, interview them, time speed of their answers and much more. As always, there is always room for improvement, but in this case we were not able to conduct this research differently because teaching children was still the primary aim of this kindergarten course. Still, this can be a very good basis for similar future research. Furthermore, since the research was conducted in a kindergarten class, there were some classes that were not attended by all children. Absence of some participants could have also affected the results. Thirdly, it is rather hard to determine a child's interest in learning a language. Especially if a child is a VYL. Sometimes, emotions affect learners' interest in a particular subject, too. Besides, characteristics of learners, such as the preferences to working individually or in a pair or a group, can affect their experience during an activity or even the whole class. Some children are more competitive than others and that will certainly affect their experience and performance during an activity. It would be ideal if we had the time and resources to measure children's motivation using different tests, but there was just not enough time, and additional problem would be getting consents for testing from all of the parents to avoid any ethical issues. Lastly, it is necessary to consider a rather small number of participants in this research. It is possible that a different group of learners would yield different results. A bigger number of participants would probably give more reliable results. Also, it should be kept in mind that the purpose of assessing learners' knowledge is not in the grades, but as Huerta-Macias (1995) states: "a story for every student. And what is the ultimate goal of evaluation but to give us the knowledge to be able to reflect upon, discuss, and assist a student's journey through the learning process" (Huerta-Macias, 1995:10).

As for the classroom environment, conditions while teaching in kindergarten are specific. Working in the kindergarten means that there is no typical classroom. Since the participants are kindergarten learners our classes were held in a playroom which is divided into three parts

which was very suitable for our classes – children liked when they would move to a different part of a room for a different task. It was a combination of a classroom surrounding focused on children and a typical classroom surroundings described in Table 2. Despite our efforts to organize classroom so it is focused on children it was different than with older learners because the room decoration and organization is not done by English teacher. During our classes there were no typical visitors, but sometimes parents interrupted classes and learners were usually rather indifferent and wanted to continue what they were doing which shows relatively high level of motivation and interest in work. This could also be considered a characteristic of a partially classroom surrounding focused on children. Doing different activities simultaneously as is advised for children focused classroom in Table 2 was impossible in this group. Unfortunately, VYLs are still too young to work on their own and they need a lot of guidance and control from their teacher, but it is visible that they are becoming more and more independent.

3.7. Research Implications

This research is very helpful for any current or future teachers of EFL to VYLs. It helps understand VYLs' needs, and gives the teacher some insight in the methods, which methods to use, and to what extent. Of course, it is a lot easier to choose methodology when a teacher gets to know their learners and sees what their preferences are. Also, since portfolios are not yet popular method of assessment in kindergartens, this research could make some of the future teachers consider this method as a plausible one. Considering future research based on this one, there are many topics that could be researched. Some of them are: other factors on VYLs' preferences of tasks and methods; VYLs' motivation; listening/speaking/vocabulary tasks with VYL. It would also be interesting to research how fast learners would acquire knowledge if they were not in mixed groups/classes and put together according to different criteria such as intelligence, interest in topic, previous speed of acquisition and such. There are also many more criteria that could be used to divide children into different groups and study methods preferences of those groups. Another possible future research could explore if children would achieve better results if divided in classes according to their method preferences, acquisition speed and interest.

4. Conclusion

Results that came up from this research were rather expected. Interested learners progress faster than the learners that are not so interested. Methods preferences in some cases differ from group to group and sometimes the results are inconclusive. The most obvious result is interested groups' preference towards innovative methods. This result was clear and visible. Other results were not so obvious but it was possible to reach conclusions from them, too

After studying VYLs' reactions to different methods of knowledge assessment we concluded that there were several factors that are important while choosing methods for assessment. The first important factor is to not make children feel pressured. They should not feel interrogated and fear the mistakes. The second important factor is using games and methods that children are familiar with and that they had participated in before in order not to cause additional stress and confusion. It is also important to make balance between fun and seriousness while doing the assessment in order to avoid children losing motivation and thinking the task is not important. The atmosphere should be serious, yet relaxed. The best way to accomplish this is by telling the learners they are going to do a task and they should do their best in order for their teacher to see how much they need to repeat this later. VYLs usually have a wish for new vocabulary and new games and this will motivate them to give the best possible results.

It can also be concluded that the best methods for assessing VYLs' knowledge are neither traditional nor innovative. Both types of methods should be used equally because different types of learners have different preferences, and learners in classrooms are almost always mixed. Furthermore, differences between learners interested in learning English and those not so interested in learning English exist. Learners that are more interested in English prefer innovative methods, and reason for that might be in the fact that they find innovative methods more challenging. There are differences between faster and slower knowledge acquiring learners, too. Faster acquiring learners prefer innovative methods because they feel like they can show more of their knowledge through these methods. If psychological profile of VYLs is considered we can see that at this age children need to be in the center of attention and have the need to show their knowledge the best they can. Also, this research reminds of the role classroom decoration and organization has on the whole performance and success of learning in a class. This research just scrapes the surface of methodology for teaching VYLs which requires much more attention in the time when learning English as a second language is becoming more and more popular.

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