INTRODUCING STEREOTYPES AND GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH STORIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TO LEARN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This research has as its main objective the acquisition of English vocabulary related to the topic of gender through stories in Early Childhood Education. The study has been carried out through an observation grid, the implementation of a didactic unit and an assessment grid. Also, three questionnaires have been done: the first before the didactic unit, one just after finishing it and, the last, one month after completing it, in order to see learners' evolution in terms of acquiring vocabulary in English. The results obtained from this study are presented in this Final Dissertation Project.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, English language learning, learning vocabulary, gender stereotypes, stories.

Resum

Aquesta investigació té com a objectiu principal l'adquisició de vocabulari en llengua anglesa relacionat amb el tema del gènere a partir dels contes a l'etapa d'Educació Infantil. L'estudi s'ha dut a terme a partir d'una graella d'observació, la implementació d'una unitat didàctica i una graella d'avaluació. A més, també s'ha portat a terme tres qüestionaris: el primer abans de la unitat didàctica, un just després d'acabar-la i, l'últim, un mes després de completar-la, per tal de veure l'evolució dels infants quant a l'adquisició del vocabulari en anglès. Els resultats obtinguts en aquest estudi es presenten en aquest Treball Final de Grau.

Paraules clau: Educació Infantil, aprenentatge de la llengua anglesa, aprenentatge de vocabulari, estereotips de gènere, contes.

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1. Introduction

This Final Dissertation Project, entitled "Introducing stereotypes and gender equality through stories in Early Childhood Education to learn English", addresses the issue of presenting gender stereotypes through stories to very young learners, while working on vocabulary. In addition, both the title and the topic coincide with the research question, which is "How can we introduce stereotypes and gender equality through stories in Early Childhood Education to learn English?".

Nowadays, working on the issue of gender in schools is essential. Moreover, it must be presented in early childhood education, so that children from a very young age are aware of the importance of this subject. Apart from this, it is interesting to link the gender topic with English learning, since in this way kids can learn vocabulary in English that can be useful in their everyday life and deal with current issues that are not normally worked on in English lessons.

From here, the general objectives that we want to achieve with this research emerge. These objectives are the following:

- To acquire English vocabulary related to gender that appears in the story.
- To work on the topic of gender stereotypes through stories in English.

Regarding the study, it is divided into different parts. First, there is a theoretical foundation that covers the most important aspects of teaching English to very young learners, the introduction of vocabulary based on the storytelling methodology, the types of stories that are worked with children in early childhood education and the presence of gender stereotypes among younger children.

In the next part, you can find the study or the research that was carried out, as well as the contextualization of the school where it was done and its participants. Apart from this, the methodology and the different tools used to collect the data are also presented. In this part, it is also explained the intervention that was accomplished with children in order to put into practice the theoretical knowledge we had and to be able to obtain some data to analyse.

From this point, some results can be established, which will serve as a basis for the discussion and conclusions of the study. Some limitations and future considerations to consider can also be found at the end.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Teaching English to very young learners

Teaching English at the early childhood education stage is not easy at all and, even more so, if we consider that children at that point are not yet fluent enough in their first language (Sumarni, Vianty & Dwi Andika, 2021). However, introducing English to very young learners offer them opportunities to expand their horizons and to awaken their enthusiasm and curiosity towards languages (Pinter, 2006).

Although there are various opinions regarding the stage or the moment that children should start learning English, there are many countries where children start learning the English language earlier. According to Shin and Crandall (2014), there are two main reasons why English is increasingly being learned at an early age. On the one hand, the first reason refers to the benefits of starting to learn a language as soon as possible. On the other hand, the second reason is based on the value given to English in education and, subsequently, when finding a job.

It is necessary to consider that, in the society we live in, we encounter a series of drawbacks when teaching English to very young learners. One of these drawbacks is that most of the time, in schools they want to teach English, but not much consideration is given to who will teach it. Furthermore, many times English teachers in schools are not prepared to teach this language or to teach a certain grade. It is essential that teachers are qualified or prepared to teach English, and especially at the early childhood education stage, as this is when the foundations of the language are established (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014).

Shin and Crandall (2014) have done research on how children behave in the preschool stage and, from there, how teachers should act to teach them English. First of all, it should be noted that very young learners are energetic and very active, so it might be interesting to do more dynamic and not so static activities. For instance, some TPR activities could be done, as this type of activity promotes learners' learning while connecting language with movement. Secondly, children are very spontaneous and are not ashamed or afraid to participate, so songs can be introduced, and drama activities can be done. Finally, it should be highlighted that children are social they like to interact with others, so when teaching English, it may be appropriate to do group activities or games in order to promote peer interactions.

2.1.1. Introducing vocabulary to young learners

The term vocabulary can be defined as "the total number of words that are needed to communicate ideas and express the speakers' meaning" (Alqahtani, 2015, p.25). Likewise, it can be mentioned that this is one of the reasons why it is essential to teach vocabulary.

Nowadays, there are various opinions that disagree with the fact that vocabulary should be taught to children from a very young age. However, according to Cameron (2001), children are perfectly capable of learning words in a foreign language through their active participation in classroom activities.

As for the number of words to be presented to very young learners, this will depend on their level, whether these words have been encountered before, the difficulty of this vocabulary or whether they can be taught easily. It must always be considered that if the words chosen to work on are abstract, that is to say, they do not have a concrete meaning, they will be more difficult for children to acquire, so in this case fewer words should be introduced (Thornbury, 2002).

An important point is that, as teachers, children should not be expected to learn vocabulary in a foreign language if they have not acquired this vocabulary in the L1, since if acquiring words in the first language is already difficult, acquiring the vocabulary in the foreign language without knowing it with the L1 is even more so (Nunan, 2011). Nevertheless, it must be ensured that very young learners are motivated to incorporate words into their vocabulary by causing situations so that they become familiar with these words. In relation to this aspect, Cameron (2001) explains that learning vocabulary is a process that consists of finding new words and, from here, finding these words again and again. Every time we find a word, we acquire more knowledge about its meaning and its use in the foreign language.

During the first times that some kind of vocabulary is presented to children, it is appropriate and interesting to introduce elements that they can see, hear, touch or experience every day. In this way, a good method to introduce English to young learners at school can be by introducing objects that are in the classroom, toys, images that learners can see daily, real elements, etc. (Pinter, 2006). There are other authors, such as Awaludin (2013), who also believe that images, realia, and gestures can help children remember vocabulary better.

Apart from all these points, Cameron (2001) advises that when learning new words for the first time, it is also important to carry out memorization activities (at regular intervals) to keep the vocabulary active and ready to be used. In other words, it consists of carrying

out activities where the children exercise their memory while working on the different words. This is an appropriate way for the vocabulary to be acquired quicker.

2.1.1.1 Teaching vocabulary through stories

Many authors talk every day more about the importance of teaching vocabulary to children based on stories. One of these authors is Cameron (2001), who states that stories are a good resource for teaching vocabulary to young learners. In accordance with this, Onu (2013) also mentions that based on stories, learners can work on aspects related to the foreign language (such as vocabulary or grammar) and moral aspects, too.

One of the main things to keep in mind when using stories to work on vocabulary in the classroom is that they must be able to relate to children's interests and, therefore, must be stories that motivate them to keep learning. Apart from that, these stories must be able to adapt to the language level of the students, since if there are too many words, the story may not make sense to the kids and may not be understood (Cameron, 2001).

Generally, children learn most of their vocabulary from social interaction with adults, but there are studies such as Cameron's (2001) that show that using stories in the classroom could offer similar opportunities in terms of learning vocabulary in an indirect way. Moreover, it must be considered that the words in the stories are within linguistic and discursive contexts, so that we are given a lot of information about these words. It may also be that the characters or the course of the story cause the words to be organized by topics, which favors learning. In relation to this, Kirsch (2012) also adds that children acquire vocabulary easily through stories since it is presented in a meaningful context and thanks to the activities that are done related to the stories.

2.2. Storytelling as a methodology to learn English

Stories have always been told, which is why it is considered the oldest way to retain things in mind. For example, a long time ago people told stories in order not to lose and preserve their traditions and customs. For this very reason, it is claimed that storytelling is the first form of teaching in school that existed and, currently, there are still societies that only have this methodology in schools (Dujmovic, 2006).

Telling stories is very enriching for human communication and, for this reason, it must be promoted in schools (Barreras, 2010). An important issue to consider is that, when starting to use this methodology with beginner learners, the mother tongue can be used from time to time, always thinking about when and why to use it. However, the more we

use English and the more the children are familiar with the language, the less the mother tongue will have to be used (Dujmovic, 2006).

Storytelling, as mentioned by Dujmovic (2006), is a resource that allows children to learn English while they review or enrich their vocabulary and incorporate new linguistic structures. This opinion is also shared by Shin and Crandall (2014), who utter that storytelling is an entertaining way to involve students and introduce new vocabulary. Nevertheless, it is also a way to develop listening skills based on the learners' prior knowledge of how the language works, their general knowledge and illustrations or visual images. In this way, children understand the general meaning of the story and can establish connections with their personal experiences (Dujmovic, 2006).

Apart from all these statements, it is also appropriate to keep in mind the idea that stories are a fun and motivating tool that serves to encourage foreign language learning and promote the desire to continue learning. Related to this, Camps-Casals, Canals & Medina (2018) state that the use of stories can be used both to teach L1 and foreign language vocabulary, as it is beneficial for children's motivation, to promote literacy and to bring children closer to learning about different cultures. In addition, storytelling also helps to improve the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

In the study by Barreras (2010), we are presented with other reasons for using the storytelling methodology in the classroom. On the one hand, it is stated that stories exercise children's imagination they allow children to imagine scenarios, characters, situations, etc. In this way, children can also link their imagination or fantasy with their real life. Likewise, it can be mentioned that stories help children to understand the world and to create their own vision of it. On the other hand, this study also mentions that storytelling has a social and emotional value, since it is a shared experience between the person who reads or tells the story and the receivers. This leads to all kinds of interactions, which are positive for learning.

When teachers consider using stories as a resource in the classroom, according to Cameron (2001), they must consider the vocabulary that the children already know, the words that they want the children to acquire and the new vocabulary that will not be worked or that will not be of interest to children.

Curtain and Dahlberg (2010) mention some criteria for storytelling to work as a methodology to learn English. First, the story must be highly predictable, which means that children must be able to make assumptions about what they think will happen. Apart from this, the story must include repetitive patterns, an aspect that favors children following the story and understanding it better. Finally, it is also emphasized that there

must be a high percentage of known vocabulary in the story, since otherwise there will be no comprehension. In this way, as Ferey (2004) also mentions in her study, stories cannot be too difficult because this could make children feel frustrated. However, the chosen stories cannot be too easy either, as this makes the learners feel bored. A middle point of complexity should be found for the storytelling to work appropriately in the classroom.

2.3. Children's stories

Rahiem (2021) states that young learners love reading, writing, and listening to stories, as this allows them to learn more about society and life in general. In fact, as Pekşen (2012) explains, tales for children began to be written for two specific objectives: as an entertainment resource and to teach kids their sex roles. In this way, from traditional (and not so traditional) stories we can also introduce current issues such as equality or gender stereotypes.

As Cameron (2001) states, most stories for young learners have some common characteristics. All have an opening, which usually begins with "Once upon a time...", then the characters are introduced and a description of the space where the story takes place is made. Then, a problem is presented, and a series of situations occur that lead to the resolution of the problem and the closure of the story (which often ends with "They all lived happily ever after"). Apart from that, many times in children's stories there is a moral lesson, which may or may not be explicit.

Stories for children contain some uses of language that can be an advantage when learning a foreign language. This is the case, for example, of the use of parallelisms. In this way, in many stories there are repetitions that can help students in language learning. Cameron (2001), exemplifies this aspect with the "*Little Red Riding Hood*" story where, when the main character arrives at her grandmother's house (where the wolf is disguised) there is a dialogue that is repeated in the following way:

Little Red Riding Hood: "Grandmother, what big eyes you've got!"

Wolf: "All the better to see you with".

Little Red Riding Hood: "Grandmother, what big ears you've got!"

Wolf: "All the better to hear you with"

…

Apart from these repetitions, it must be considered that the stories must also be repeated in the classroom, that is to say, children must be able to listen to the stories more than once. These repetitions cause certain elements of the language to be acquired or reinforced. In addition, some stories already include repetitions of important vocabulary or structures, which allows kids to remember more things from the tale (Mart, 2012).

2.3.1. Traditional stories vs. unexplained stories in early childhood education

Stories are one of the first tools used to introduce children to reading in early childhood education. They are very important for learning and for children to identify their roles (male and female) in the society in which we live (Canals-Botines, 2023).

Nowadays, stories have the strength of exercising power over women and maintaining gender inequality (Neikirk, 2009). Canisius (2012) talks about the role of gender stereotypes in children's stories and emphasizes that they are very abundant. For instance, Canisius (2012) states that in stories male characters are almost always strong, powerful, and intelligent. On the other hand, female characters are weak, innocent, and sweet. In addition, women are also assigned the role of motherhood and housewife. In accordance with this idea, Hill and Jacobs (2019) describe male characters as people who are permitted to explore, go on an adventure, solve their problems and so on. However, they also remark that female characters have hardly ever the main role of the stories, and they are considered weaker and unable to do many tasks. Likewise, Totibadze (2019) affirms that this lack of female characters in the center of the stories makes children give limited gender roles or very negative stereotypes. Also, in relation to this aspect, Neikirk (2009) mentions that in fairy tales the woman considered to be "good" or "correct" is submissive and accepts her lot in life and, meanwhile, waits for her prince to appear and decide her destiny. As Pekşen (2012) utters, these types of stories have been always so successful in gender stereotyping that almost everyone takes these roles for granted.

According to all these ideas, Mendoza and Reese (2001) emphasize that literature provide characters and situations to learners with which they can identify themselves and from there establish their own thinking on a topic. One of the ideas that are imposed to children in early childhood through literature is that if a woman is passive, submissive and dependent, she is considered a good woman (Pekşen, 2012). With this, it is achieved that when the female children read the stories, they assume these roles and that, when they grow up, they hope that a "handsome prince" will save them from all their

problems. The same goes for boys, who, when they are adults, are expected to always be the ones who take the first step in everything and who are never afraid or ashamed of anything (Pekşen, 2012).

Schools should be able to tell stories and read books that are not stereotyped and that do not establish these roles for both men and women. In this way, the mentality of the children is challenged, since they are not used to hearing and seeing these types of roles. In addition, there are some findings that state that reading short stories every day where the characters are not stereotyped and the traditional roles are not established, reduces the thinking based on stereotypes of young learners (Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1999). There are other studies, such as that of Tsao (2008), which also find that exposing children to non-stereotypical stories reduces the notions of gender stereotypes they have.

It must be emphasized that children's literature can become a very powerful medium with a lot of influence on children. For this reason, students must be offered non-stereotyped models in order to start changing people's mentality from an early age (Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1999). In relation to this aspect, Tsao (2008) recommends that, during the early childhood education stage, teachers select stories that reflect fairness for both the male and female genders, therefore, the role of teachers has a great responsibility. Later, when the children are already able to choose their own readings consciously, they will be the ones who make the choice.

As for schools, it is very interesting that they offer children different versions of a story to reformulate the different social ideologies that are presented. It is worth mentioning the unexplained stories, which serve to encourage the critical spirit of children and to bring them closer to new realities (Canals-Botines, 2023).

2.3.2. Gender stereotypes in early childhood education

Many times, gender goes unnoticed or is not given sufficient importance in the early childhood education curriculum. This is since children are considered to be too innocent and unable to understand issues such as gender (Ramdaeni, Adriany & Yulindrasari, 2019). However, Ramdaeni, Adriany and Yulindrasari (2019) add that children are active agents capable of constructing and deconstructing their thoughts and ideas about gender.

Akbar, Malik and Farooq (2018) state that the process of gender identity starts at the age of two and becomes quite stable when children are six years old. In the same line,

Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1999) state that it is during Early Childhood Education that children develop their thinking and their attitudes regarding the differences between men and women. Likewise, it is during this stage that children build their gender schema. According to Taylor (2003), the gender schema theory mentions that younger learners develop a sense of femininity or masculinity based on gender stereotypes and, subsequently, organize their behaviour and actions based on these. Furthermore, as Tsao (2008) says, gender role stereotypes affect the image children have of themselves. This means that if a child has a negative view of his/her own gender, this fact can affect his/her identity and self-esteem.

From a very young age, children already begin to develop the concept of what it means to them to be a man and to be a woman. This concept is mainly based on what children see on the classifications made by society (Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1999).

Apart from that, the social interactions of children with other people or with other materials (for example, oral and written literacy) play an essential role in exposing gender image to children. Nevertheless, it is said that:

> Children are initiated into racial discrimination, community, class and gender roles at such a young age that they themselves do not realize and remain unable to evade these biases with which they are fed for a long time along with their growth ad grooming process (Akbar, Malik and Farooq, 2018, p.66).

3. Study

3.1. Contextualization of the school

The school where I carried out the different activities of this study is Vall del Ges School, located in Torelló. It is a state school which includes early childhood education and primary education, with one classroom per grade. The school currently has 182 students, and the ratios are about 22-23 students per classroom.

This school uses a methodology based on the children's own experiences, so that they can feel active. This way, priority is given to certain aspects such as direct observation, manipulation, and experimentation.

In Early childhood education they work on projects, corners and learning environments in mixed age groups. Regarding the linguistic project, Catalan is used in learning and in all school activities. All the lessons are taught in Catalan, from I3 to 6th grade. Apart from that, it is important to state that the school also ensures to maintain all family languages in order to achieve multilingual competence.

One of the aims of the linguistic project is to promote the transfer of learning between languages, keeping in mind both common linguistic structures and the specific ones. In addition, it is considered that the majority of students come from Spanish-speaking families.

As for English, it starts in the second term of I3. Usually, there are two sessions a week. Comprehension and oral expression are worked a lot from dialogues and conversations, performances and games and songs.

I have to admit that this school was chosen to accomplish my final dissertation project because my 4th year internship was done there and, therefore, I already knew the children. In addition, during this time, I was able to see that in the stage I had to focus on, Early Childhood Education, stories were used a lot as a learning resource.

3.2. Participants

To fulfil the practical part of my final dissertation project, I focused on the I4 classroom (4-year-old kids) at Vall del Ges School. This group is formed by 23 children: 12 girls and 11 boys. It is necessary to mention that within the group there is a high percentage of immigrant children, therefore, there is a wide variety of mother tongues in the classroom. As for the English language, only two of the learners have it as their mother tongue, that is, they speak it at home.

Apart from all these aspects, it is also crucial to comment that it is a very active and participative group of children. In addition, they enjoy the activities that they execute at school every day and, one of the things they like the most is the literary world.

3.3. Methodology and tools

To accomplish this study, different were used, such as the observation grid, the didactic unit, and the assessment grid.

3.3.1. Observation grid

The first tool used in this study is the observation grid. Based on direct observation, I was able to collect information by analysing the students during several sessions in the classroom. This information is collected in three observation grids. These grids can provide us with information on how the process of acquiring the worked vocabulary occurs.

In each session, an observation grid of a few relevant items was made. These items are related to the general objectives, which have been mentioned previously. In the three observation grids I wanted to observe the children's level of motivation, behaviour, participation in the different activities and the use of vocabulary. However, in the first grid I also wanted to observe the prior knowledge that the children had before starting the didactic unit, in order to know what the starting point was. As for the second and third grids, I also wanted to analyse the learners' comprehension and interactions, since having worked on the vocabulary and the stories deeply, it is important to know the children's level of comprehension and if they make contributions about the subject.

It is necessary to emphasize that the observation grid for each session can be found in Appendix 8.

3.3.2. Didactic unit

The second tool used in this study is the didactic unit. Carrying out a didactic sequence with children, in this case, is essential, as it is necessary to put into practice and check how to introduce the topic of gender in early childhood education through stories, while working on the vocabulary.

Pre-test:

Before starting with the didactic intervention at school, a pre-test was carried out to find out what prior knowledge the children had regarding the vocabulary that is worked on in

the different sessions. In addition, this pre-test will help to make a good analysis at the end and to know if the children have really acquired the vocabulary.

The pre-test of my study was carried out individually, although if any child wished, he/she could come with a partner in order to avoid discomfort. The flashcards were shown to each child, and they have been asked "What is this?". In this way, the children had to answer what means each image in English (ex: lazy, strong, small, etc.). At all times the children were encouraged and, in case they did not know the word, they were told that nothing happens, and that there would be several sessions with activities where they would surely learn that vocabulary. Thus, the children felt more confident and motivated to learn.

In order to keep a record of the answers given by the children and to have information about if they knew the vocabulary, a grid (which can be found in Appendix 5) was prepared to mark whether each child knew each of the words. Likewise, if a child knew a word, the corresponding box was marked with an "X".

First session:

After doing the pre-test to find out the knowledge that the children had, the first session of the didactic unit was carried out. This first session was accomplished with all the children together, that is to say, with the whole class group. In addition, it should also be emphasized that the session took place in the ordinary classroom of the I4 learners, since no special space was needed. The only essential thing for this session was that children were placed in a circle on the floor, so that the activities could be done properly and everyone could participate.

First of all, an adaptation of the traditional tale *Little Red Riding Hood* was told in English (the adaptation can be found in Appendix 1). This storytelling was done using a visual support, in this case, the stick puppets (which can be found in Appendix 4), so that the story is better understood. Then, the children were asked if they had understood the story and, if so, to say what they had understood.

Secondly, the adaptation of the story *The Strong Riding Hood* was told in English (the adaptation can be found in Appendix 2). This time, the story itself was used as visual support, so that children could see the images and better understand the story, since it is not traditional, perhaps with stick puppets it would not have been enough to be well understood. Then, as with the other story, the children were asked to explain what they have understood.

Thirdly, flashcards with the vocabulary of the story were introduced. These flashcards (which can be found in Appendix 3) were the same as those used in the pre-test, so the children had already seen them before. Each time a flashcard was shown, the name was said orally, and the learners had to repeat it.

Finally, a more dynamic activity was performed. Each of the words corresponding to the flashcards were mimed, and the kids had to guess the word in order to work on the vocabulary.

Second session:

The second session of the didactic unit was done together with all the children of I4 in their ordinary classroom. The students sit on the floor making a circle in order to be able to participate actively in the different activities.

To start with the session, the two adaptations of *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Strong Riding Hood* stories were retold. Then, there was an oral activity in which the questions "What are the Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf in the first story like? And about the second story?" were asked to the children. Based on these questions, the vocabulary was worked on with the flashcards.

Then, the flashcards were re-introduced one at a time, that is to say, the names of the words were said, and the children had to repeat them. In this way, the vocabulary was remembered in order to have it more present to accomplish the next activity.

To finish the session, two last less static activities were done. The first one was a TPR activity, where the flashcards were hung in different places in the classroom and the children had to follow orders to go to the corresponding flashcard. Some of these orders were, for example, "run to kind" or "swim to clever". As for the second activity, it consisted of playing the telephone game with the vocabulary that has been worked on. To start the game, a word has been whispered to one of the kids and, he/she has had to whisper it to the partner next to him/her (and so on until the end). The last child has had to point to the corresponding flashcard based on the word he/she has been whispered, that is, the word he/she has heard.

Third session:

The third session of the didactic unit was done with all the learners together. They made a circle on the floor in their ordinary classroom.

Firstly, the English adaptations of *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Strong Riding Hood* stories were told. In this way, the children were able to remember the stories and the

vocabulary. Then, the vocabulary was also reviewed with the flashcards and, the children had to orally repeat the name of each word.

Secondly, an activity was performed with the flashcards, to remember the vocabulary and to acquire it quicker. This activity consisted of showing only a part of each flashcard, that is to say, the children were only able to see a small part of the image and had to guess the corresponding word. Subsequently, the same dynamic was followed, where the learners had to guess the word, but instead of showing only part of the images, the flashcards were turned over quickly.

Thirdly, another activity was fulfilled, where an image of the traditional Little Red Riding Hood and an image of the Strong Riding Hood were pasted on the board. The students were asked the questions "What is each of the main characters like? What are the differences between the first and second Red Riding Hood?", and they had to interact and make contributions to answer the question. The flashcards were always placed on the floor, so that the children could use the vocabulary to describe the protagonists. Apart from this, the children's contributions were noted on the board (next to each image). This was a good way for the kids to feel confident about themselves and their interventions and to see that they were always considered.

Finally, from the last activity, the children were asked some questions in English, such as "Can girls be strong and brave?". In this way, it was possible to work on the vocabulary while also talking about the topic of gender.

Post-test:

At the end of the three sessions of the didactic unit, a post-test was done. This post-test allows us to know if the vocabulary has been acquired once the different sessions have ended.

In this post-test, the same procedure was followed as previously with the pre-test, that is, the children could come individually or in pairs and had to answer the question "What is this?" when they were shown each flashcard.

The post-test can be found in Appendix 6.

Delayed test:

One month after performing the didactic unit with the I4 kids, a delayed test was done (which can be found in Appendix 7). In this way, it is possible to know which words the children remember after a certain time of having accomplished the different activities.

Regarding the vocabulary worked on during all the sessions, it must be said that it is directly related to the topic of gender stereotypes, which allows students to be aware of it and establish dialogues using the vocabulary in English.

3.3.3. Assessment grid

The third tool used in this study is the assessment grid. With this grid, it is possible to assess different items that have been observed throughout the intervention with the I4 children. Aspects such as the motivation and interest shown by the students, their participation in the classroom, the use of vocabulary in the different activities and their interest in the topic of gender are assessed.

It is important to mention that this assessment grid can be found in Appendix 9.

4. Results

Once the observation grids, the evaluation grid and the different tests (pre-test, post-test and delayed test) have been carried out, it is time to take a look at the results that have been obtained.

Based on the results obtained from the observation grid (which can be found in Appendix 8), during the first session the children were motivated to listen to the stories and made contributions to know more things or ask questions to better understand the story. Apart from that, it is also important to state that most children knew the traditional tale of *Little Red Riding Hood,* but only a few know the modern and innovative version of *The Strong Riding Hood*. When introducing the vocabulary for the first time, the children were attentive and eager to learn and, in the last activity, some of the students were already starting to use the vocabulary with the support of the flashcards.

In the second session, it was possible to observe that the children's participation was active and that, each time, they used the vocabulary more fluently and needed less support from the flashcards to remember the words.

In the third session of the didactic unit, it was possible to analyse that the learners were encouraged to carry out the different activities, since they already knew the vocabulary. In the last activity, where a question was suggested in order to start a debate on the topic of gender stereotypes, the children made contributions in their mother tongue (since they are four-year-old kids), but they used the vocabulary worked on in the classroom without the help of any kind of support to remember the words. In addition, it can be seen that the children really know the meaning of each of the words, as they put them into context appropriately.

Regarding the results obtained from the assessment grid (which can be found in Appendix 9), the children have always been motivated and interested in the different activities. In addition, they have used the vocabulary as much as they can and their involvement in making contributions on the topic of gender has been exemplary.

Concerning the three tests that have been carried out during the didactic unit, it must be said that these allow observing the differences in vocabulary knowledge between when no activities had yet been done (based on the prior knowledge of the students), at the end of the didactic unit, and one month after carrying out the activities.

Firstly, regarding the pre-test (which can be found in Appendix 5), it can be analysed that most children do not know many of the words before starting the didactic unit. There are also learners who do not know any of the words. Surprisingly, as can be seen in the

graph below, the word *Small* is the most familiar to the children, as more than half of the class knows it (13 kids). Then, there are the words *Strong, Brave, Lazy* and *Kind*, known only for some of the students. It should also be mentioned that the words *Sweet, Clever* and *Weak* are not known by any.
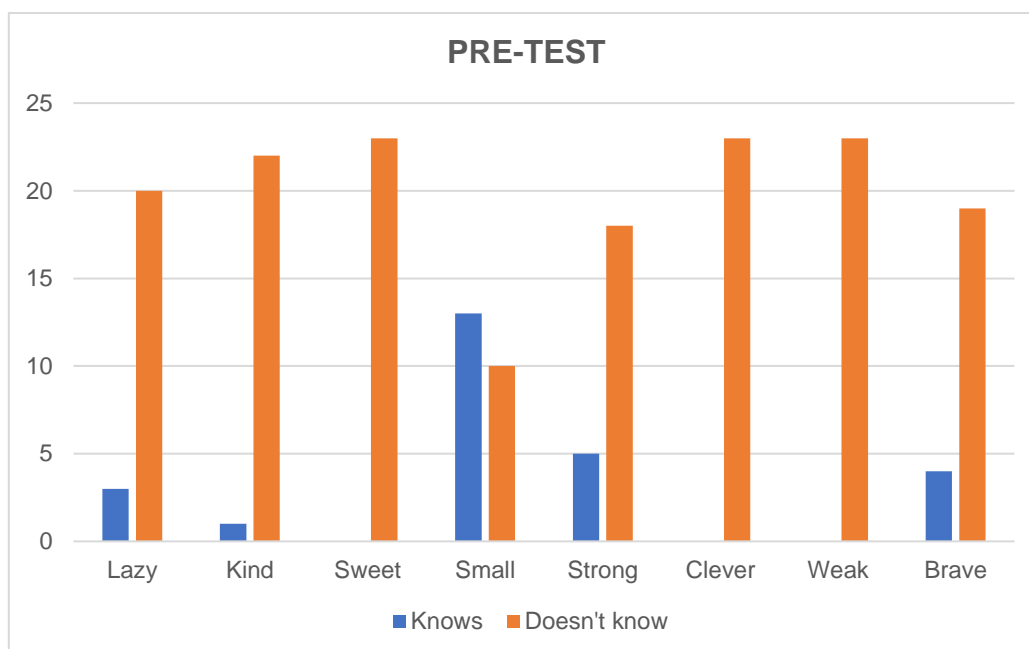

Figure 1. Pre-test

Secondly, it is necessary to comment about the results obtained from the post-test (attached to Appendix 6), which was carried out at the end of the sessions of the didactic unit. With this post-test it can be observed that after having completed the activities, the children have acquired most of the vocabulary worked on.

The most well-known words, in this case, are *Small, Strong, Lazy, Sweet, Brave* and *Clever*. There is only one child who does not know the word *Small* and two children who do not know the word *Strong*. As for the words Weak and Kind, there are more children who do not know them, since during the sessions it was seen that they are more difficult for children to remember. In this way, thanks to the graph below, it can be said that *Weak* is the word that fewer children know.
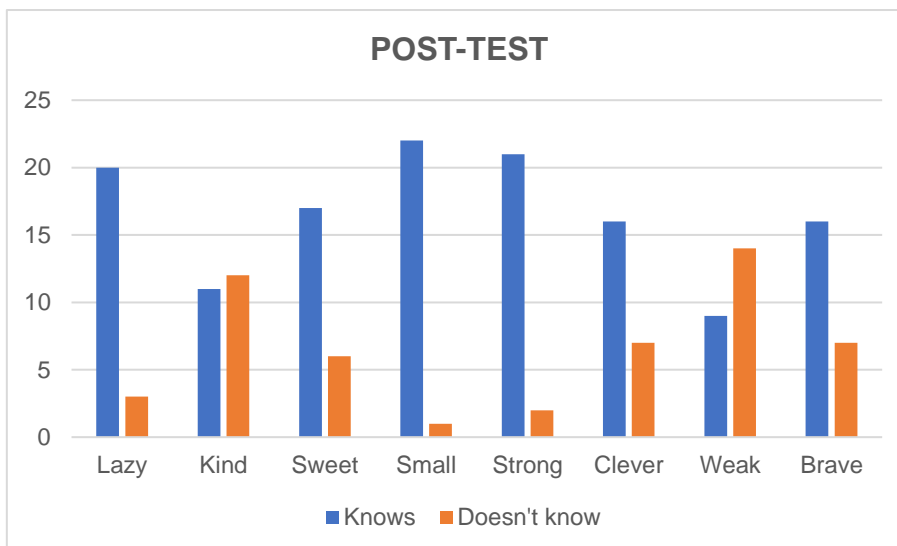
Figure 2. Post-test

Thirdly, it is necessary to analyse the results obtained from the delayed test, which can be found in Appendix 7. The delayed test was done one month after the end of the didactic unit, in order to see if the children had really acquired the vocabulary.

As can be appreciated in the bar graph below, after one month of carrying out the activities, although the results are very positive, the children do not remember as many words as in the post-test. In this case, there are five children who do not know the word *Small* and four children who do not know the word *Strong*. Therefore, it can be mentioned that the word that most children remember is *Strong*, followed by *Small, Lazy* and *Sweet*. Regarding the words *Kind* and *Weak*, there are more learners who do not know them. Specifically, in the case of *Weak* there are only 8 students who know the word, and, in the case of *Kind*, there are 11 children who know the word.
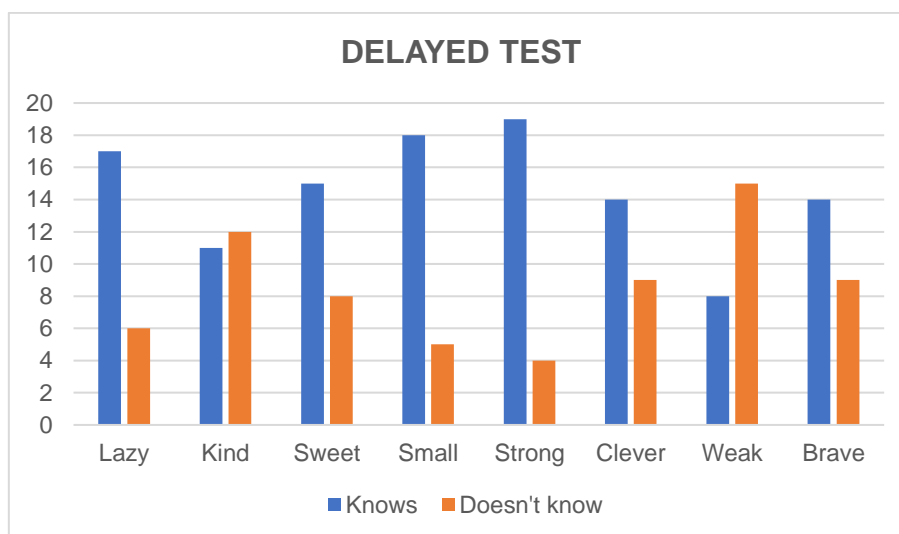

Figure 3. Delayed test

To conclude, a look can be taken at the graph below, where it can be seen the evolution of the acquisition of the different words worked on through the didactic unit. It can be observed that in the pre-test, very few words are known by the children and, on the other hand, right after carrying out the activities, in the post-test, the children already know more words. There are even students who know all the vocabulary. Finally, in the delayed test, the children know fewer words than in the post-test because a certain amount of time has already passed, but this is how it really can be seen the words that each child has acquired. Likewise, it can be said that the words most children have acquired are *Strong, Small* and *Lazy*. In contrast, the words that have been acquired by fewer children are *Weak* and *Kind*. However, if we compare the delayed test with the pre-test with the knowledge the children had before carrying out the didactic unit, we can see that there has been a considerable vocabulary acquisition.
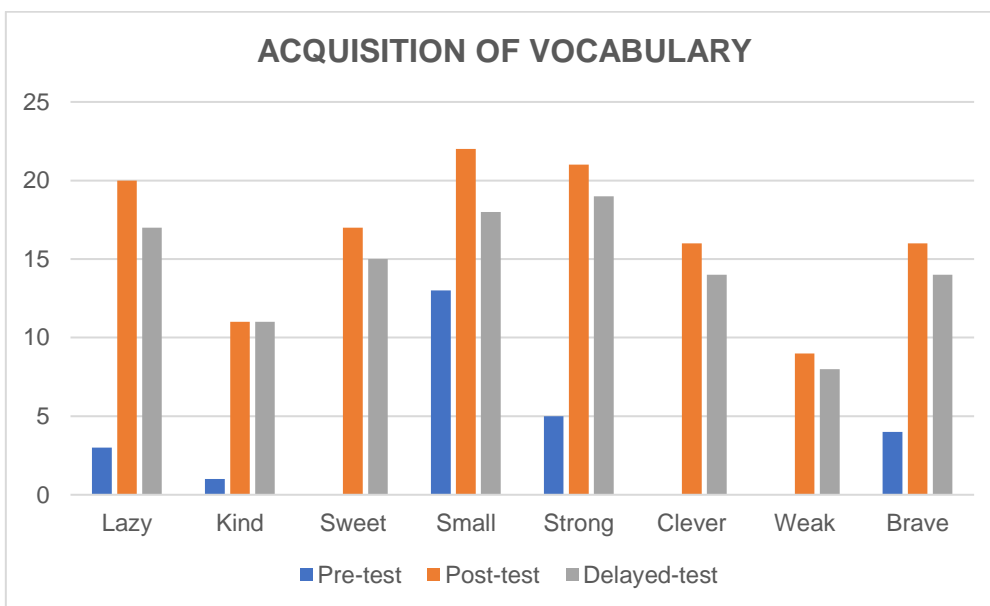

Figure 4. Acquisition of vocabulary

5. Discussion

The main objective of this research is for young learners to acquire vocabulary in the English language related to the topic of gender through stories. Before carrying out the practical part of the study, theoretical searches were done to later be able to make an analysis with the own observations.

First, Shin and Crandall (2014) talk about the importance of teaching English to very young learners. In their study, tips are given for teaching English appropriately in schools. For example, one of the aspects that they highlight is that in Early Childhood Education, games or group activities must be done to promote interactions in English, since this is a good way for children to learn a foreign language. According to my experience with my own study, I have been able to verify that, from games, kids are much more motivated to learn and have much more interest in what they are being taught. In addition, it is true that in this way more interactions are established between the students, using as much vocabulary as possible in English.

Apart from this, Shin and Crandall (2014) also mention that when you want to teach English to young learners, it can be interesting to do TPR activities, since they are very active and energetic children. Personally, I could see that doing TPR activities is a very good option when teaching a foreign language to young learners, since it is a way to work on vocabulary in English and, at the same time, for them to move and be more active. In this way, doing more dynamic activities allows children to change the mode they learn a new language.

Secondly, in terms of teaching vocabulary, Cameron (2001) recommends carrying out word-repetition activities so that learners remain active and remember the vocabulary better. From my point of view, I have been able to analyse that it is essential to do activities to memorize vocabulary, so that it is easier for children to acquire these words. However, it is necessary that the activities are diverse even if many of the activities are to retain the vocabulary, the activities must be different. For instance, as I have done in my research, you can do activities where each time children have to say the vocabulary faster, where they have to play some kind of game, etc. Apart from this method, other authors, such as Awaludin (2013), mention that a good way to introduce vocabulary to very young learners is through images, real objects or gestures. Likewise, I have been able to verify that it is true that from images (with flashcards) and mime games (where gestures are done) students acquire the vocabulary better.

It must also be kept in mind that, when teaching vocabulary to children in Early Childhood Education, the appropriate number of words must be taught. As Thornbury (2002) says,

if the words we want to teach are abstract, we must introduce fewer words, since they are more difficult for children to internalize. In this way, my study has been based on the acquisition of only eight words, because these are words that do not have a specific meaning and can be difficult to understand.

Thirdly, regarding the use of stories in the classroom to teach English, it must be considered that these stories must be motivating for the learners who listen to them. Cameron (2001) states that children must be interested in the stories that are told to them. As for me, I have observed that choosing a traditional story that everyone knew and a story that only a couple of children knew, made everyone feel more motivated and engaged in the class. In addition, there were also many interactions where aspects of the stories were discussed. These interactions, according to Barreras (2010), are very positive for learning and comprehension. Apart from that, another aspect that has also made them better understand the stories and the vocabulary worked on is the repetition, that is, as recommended by Mart (2012), stories were told several times to reinforce the vocabulary and understand more things.

To continue with the topic of stories, it is essential to comment that the type of story we choose will influence whether the children are motivated. Curtain and Dahlberg (2010) explain that stories must be predictable, so that children can make assumptions about what will happen. A good example can be the traditional tale of "*Little Red Riding Hood*", since from the moment that the protagonist finds the wolf, it can already be assumed that he will eat her and her grandmother. In my observations, I could appreciate that many of the children made comments while the story was being told to say what they thought would happen next.

Fourthly, it is interesting to talk about the issue of gender stereotypes in stories and also about their presence in Early Childhood Education. With this research, I have been able to verify that, as Canisius (2012) says, the male protagonists of traditional tales, in this case the wolf or the hunter, are strong, powerful, and clever. On the contrary, many times in the stories female characters are pretty, sweet, and weak. This fact can be seen in one of the tales that has been used to carry out this study, the traditional tale of "Little Red Riding Hood", where at the beginning of the story it is said that the girl is sweet, and kind and the wolf is clever and strong. In this way, schools should opt for the idea of Tsao (2008), who advises that non-stereotyped stories should be presented to children to gradually change people's mentality regarding gender. A good way to do this is through unexplained stories, which help to awaken children's critical spirit and make them change the way they see the world.

To conclude, I think it is appropriate to mention that if you compare the theoretical studies that have been done on the topic with the practical part of my research, I can state that most aspects commented on by some of the great theorists can be verified.

6. Conclusions

To conclude this study, it can be affirmed that the methodology that has been used to introduce the topic of gender through stories to four-year-olds to learn English has been adequate, since all the obtained results confirm that there has been an acquisition of vocabulary.

Throughout the different sessions, it was possible to see that thanks to the stories that were told and the different activities that were carried out, the children understood the stories and the meaning of the vocabulary, which was related to the topic of gender.

Regarding the central topic that had to be introduced with the didactic unit, stereotypes and gender equality, children were motivated and made all kinds of contributions that showed that they were interested in the topic and that they knew the importance of working it at school.

For all these aspects, it must be said that the objectives have been successfully achieved. On the one hand, about the first objective, English vocabulary related to the topic of gender has been acquired through stories. The traditional story *Little Red Riding Hood* and the more modern and non-stereotypical version entitled *The Strong Riding Hood*, together with their visual supports and flashcards, have made the vocabulary better acquired. On the other hand, as for the second objective, the issue of gender stereotypes in the English language has also been worked on through stories. The different activities have caused the learners to participate actively in the classroom and to change their vision of seeing the world, in other words, to adopt a less sexist and stereotypical point of view.

Apart from all these points, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that, thanks to the results obtained, an answer can be given to the research question "How can we introduce stereotypes and gender equality through stories in Early Childhood Education to learn English?", while stating that a good way to introduce stereotypes and gender equality through stories in Early Childhood Education to learn English can be by working on vocabulary through a wide variety of activities such as those carried out in this study.

At last, I must admit that having done this study has enriched me both professionally and personally and has made me realize the true function of a teacher, to guide children in their development and ensure that their learning is fully enriching.

6.1. Limitations

Throughout this study, there have been some limitations that have made the whole process somewhat difficult.

Firstly, when I started with the theoretical framework, I saw that there is very little recent information on teaching English to very young learners, that is, there is a lot of information on Primary Education but very little on Early Childhood Education. Apart from this, there is also a lack of information about teaching vocabulary from stories, an aspect that has made this section of the theoretical framework much shorter than the others.

Secondly, regarding the stories used, I saw from the beginning that there are only a few stories in English for kids that deal with the issue of gender. However, in Catalan there is a wide range of options, so I opted for a story in Catalan and from there I adapted it to English.

Finally, I think it is appropriate to mention that throughout the different sessions there has been a notable acquisition of the vocabulary, but perhaps a couple of sessions were missing for the vocabulary to be acquired better.

6.2. Future considerations

Carrying out this study has been a great effort and, as can be seen, there have been both good things and some limitations. Nevertheless, I admit it is important to consider aspects to consider in future occasions, as I think this can be good research to accomplish also with primary school children.

First, one of the things I would perhaps add to this study would be to do more sessions with children doing more dynamic activities, that is, with more games to work on vocabulary. Apart from that, I would probably divide the group (first half of the class and then the remaining students) so that it would be easier to do this type of activity.

In second place, regarding the part of telling the stories, I would look for more real puppets made of clothes, so that everything would be more fluid and there would not only be images to represent the characters.

To conclude, it must be said that having recognized and identified the different limitations of my study and having thought about future considerations, I have enriched my learning and consider that I can take all these aspects into account to improve future research.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1: Little Red Riding Hood *(adaptation of the traditional tale written by Charles Perrault).*

Once upon a time, there was a **sweet** and **kind** girl who lived in a house with her mum. She was called Little Red Riding Hood because she always wore a red hood.

One day, she had to go to grandma's house to bring her a basket full of food, since she was sick.

On her way, she met a **clever** and **strong** wolf.

- "Hello!" – said the wolf. "Where are you going?"

- "I'm going to visit my grandma, who lives in a house in the middle of the forest."

The wolf ran to grandma's house by the shortest way. Instead, Little Red Riding Hood stayed picking flowers and chose the longest way.

The wolf arrived first and he ate grandma. Then, he put on her clothes and got into bed.

A little later, Little Red Riding Hood arrived. She looked at the wolf.

- "Grandma, what big eyes you have!"

- "All the better to see you with!" – said the wolf.

- "Grandma, what big ears you have!"

- "All the better to hear you with!" – said the wolf.

- "Grandma, what big teeth you have!"

- "All the better to eat you with!" – shouted the wolf.

Then the wolf jumped out of the bed and ate Little Red Riding Hood.

At that moment, a hunter that was near the house heard a scream. He ran to the house and with scissors he opened the wolf's belly.

Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother jumped out quickly of the wolf's belly, and they hugged each other. Little Red Riding Hood went to find large stones and filled the wolf's belly.

When the wolf woke up, he noticed that the stones were too heavy. He tried to run away, but he fell and died.

And this is the end of the story of the Little Red Riding Hood.

Appendix 2: The Strong Riding Hood *(adaptation of the story written by "Vivim del Cuentu").*

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Little Red Riding Hood who lived with her mum in a small house.

One day, she went to visit her grandma, who was sick, to bring her a basket full of fruit, cakes and some medicines.

Everyone in the town wondered how such a **small** girl was able to carry such a large basket. But Little Red Riding Hood was a **brave** and strong girl, able to grab the basket with just one finger.

After walking for a while, Little Red Riding Hood stopped for a moment to do some stretching. At that moment, a wolf that was very hungry appeared and told her:

- "Good morning, Little Red Riding Hood! Do you know who I am? My name is Fierce Wolf, and I am the strongest in the forest. Do you want me to help you with the basket you are carrying?"

- "Yes, I know who you are" -said the girl. "But you are not strong at all, you are very **weak** since you are lying on the sofa all day".

- "I am sure that your basket is not so heavy…"- said the wolf.

Then, the wolf tried to grab the basket, but he couldn't! The wolf, very angry, asked the girl where she was going. When he knew that she was going to visit grandma, he showed little red riding hood the longest path. Instead, he took the shortest path. However, the girl already knew the wolf's trap, and she was sure that she would get to grandma's house before the wolf, since she was faster.

The wolf ran and ran, but he couldn't imagine that little red riding hood was already in the house. She had dressed up as her grandma, as she wanted to teach the wolf a lesson.

When the wolf arrived at the house, he approached the bed, but he didn't notice anything strange, so he said:

- "Grandma, what beautiful eyes you have!"

- "All the better to see your fat belly!" -said the girl.

- "Grandma, what white teeth you have!"

- "All the better to scare the wolves!" -said little red riding hood.

- "Grandma, what a strong hand you have!"

- "All the better to shake you better!!!" -shouted the girl.

Then, Little Red Riding Hood jumped, grabbed the wolf by the tail and spun him until he hit the wall. In this way, the wolf understood the lesson that the girl had given him.

And it is said that this is how that weak and **lazy** wolf stopped bothering all people, even if they were not as strong as Little Red Riding Hood.
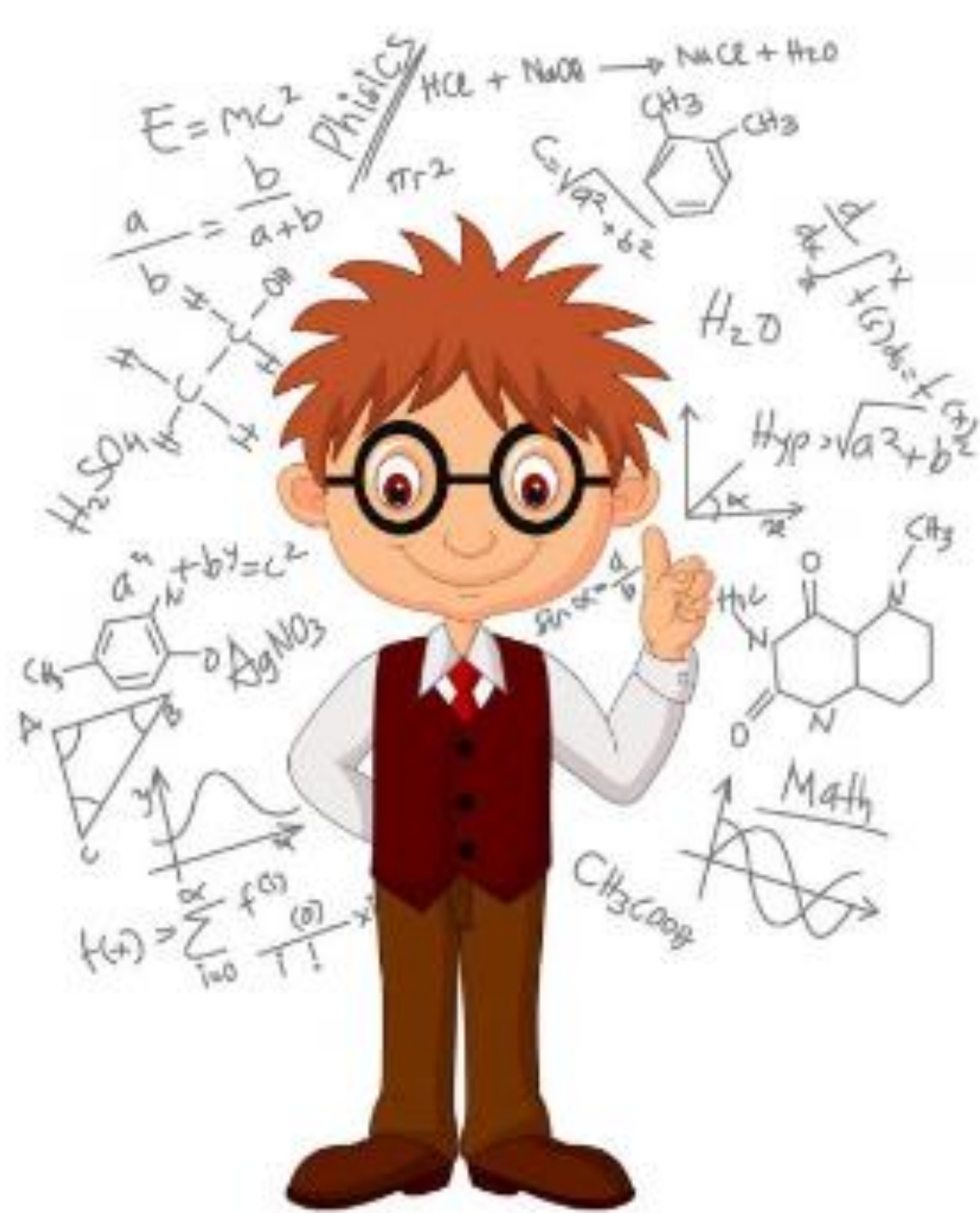
Appendix 3: Flashcards

Appendix 4: Stick puppets

Appendix 5: Pre-test

	LAZY	KIND	SWEET	SMALL	STRONG	CLEVER	WEAK	BRAVE
Student 1								
Student 2				X				
Student 3		X		X	X			X
Student 4								
Student 5				X				
Student 6				X				X
Student 7				X				
Student 8	X							
Student 9								
Student 10					X			
Student 11				X	X			
Student 12								
Student 13				X				
Student 14				X				X
Student 15	X							
Student 16				X				
Student 17				X				
Student 18								
Student 19					X			X
Student 20	X			X				
Student 21				X				
Student 22				X				
Student 23					X			

Appendix 6: Post-test

	LAZY	KIND	SWEET	SMALL	STRONG	CLEVER	WEAK	BRAVE
Student 1	X		X	X	X	X		X
Student 2				X	X		X	
Student 3	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student 4	X			X	X			X
Student 5	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Student 6	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student 7	X		X	X	X	X		X
Student 8	X		X	X	X			
Student 9		X		X	X	X		
Student 10	X		X	X	X	X		
Student 11	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student 12	X				X	X		X
Student 13	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Student 14	X	X	X	X		X		X
Student 15	X		X	X	X			X
Student 16	X			X	X			X
Student 17		X	X	X	X			X
Student 18	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Student 19	X		X	X	X			X
Student 20	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student 21	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Student 22	X	X		X		X		
Student 23	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Appendix 7: Delayed-test

	LAZY	KIND	SWEET	SMALL	STRONG	CLEVER	WEAK	BRAVE
Student 1	X		X		X	X		X
Student 2				X	X		X	
Student 3	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student 4	X			X	X			
Student 5	X	X		X		X		X
Student 6		X	X	X	X		X	X
Student 7	X		X	X	X	X		X
Student 8	X		X	X	X			
Student 9		X		X	X	X		
Student 10	X		X		X	X		
Student 11		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student 12	X				X	X		X
Student 13	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Student 14	X	X	X	X		X		X
Student 15	X		X	X	X			X
Student 16	X			X	X			X
Student 17		X	X	X	X			X
Student 18	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Student 19	X		X	X	X			X
Student 20	X	X		X	X			X
Student 21			X	X		X	X	X
Student 22	X	X		X		X		
Student 23	X	X	X		X	X	X	

Appendix 8: Observation grids

1ˢᵗ session observation grid:

Area of Observation	Description
Motivation	Children were always motivated by the stories I told them and showed a lot of interest. From time to time, some of the kids made interventions related to the stories, an aspect that let me know that it was a fascinating topic for them. For example, one child explained how he thought the story of *The Strong Riding Hood* would end, that is to say, he made assumptions.
Prior knowledge	With regard to the children's previous knowledge, it should be mentioned that most of the learners knew the traditional tale "*Little Red Riding Hood*" and its characters, but only a couple of them knew the story "*The Strong Riding Hood*".
Behaviour	Children struggled to comprehend the story, as it is more difficult to understand because it is told in English. However, if in any case a child got lost or did not understand a particular word, he/she did not hesitate to ask.
Participation	All students were motivated, and their participation was active at all times. In fact, as a curiosity, it should be noted that they all wanted to explain their version of the story and what they understood. In addition, in the activities where children had to repeat the vocabulary, as it was a topic that they like, they all repeated the words without any problem.

Area of Observation	Description
Use of vocabulary	Since it was the first time that the stories were told and, therefore, that the new vocabulary was introduced, children first had to repeat the words several times before starting to use them. In this way, in the last activity (where learners had to mime) some of them used the images of the flashcards as a support to remember the words.

2nd session observation grid:

Area of Observation	Description
Motivation	Children were motivated and showed interest both in the two stories and in the activities. In addition, the fact that the last two activities were games to work on vocabulary made the children more eager to learn and that they were really attentive. Apart from that, since these were more dynamic activities and not so static, learners were much more excited.
	As a curiosity to highlight, when the stories were told, one child said that his parents always told him the *Little Red Riding Hood* story because he liked it so much. Immediately, all kids exclaimed that they really liked this story, too. In this way, I could also observe that it was a story that really motivated them a lot.
	During this session, it could be seen that children were able to say characteristics of the protagonists of the two stories. This showed that they had understood both

Comprehension	stories and that they knew what the characters were like. Apart from that, both in the TPR activity and in the telephone game, it could be observed that most students could already relate each word to the corresponding flashcard. Specifically, in the TPR activity, when I gave a command, most learners went to the appropriate flashcard.
Behaviour	Children struggled to understand the two stories and asked questions to fully understand the vocabulary. However, they asked fewer questions than before, since the stories had already been told in the previous session.
Participation	Children's participation in the activities was active, as they showed willingness at all times. In addition, as the last activities were games to learn vocabulary, they did it with more desire and enthusiasm.
Use of vocabulary	Children tried to use the vocabulary as much as possible. In fact, in the activity of describing the main characters of each story, some of the students used words that had been worked on before in English, an aspect that really surprised me.
Interactions	Throughout the session, the children interacted. Especially in the oral activities, such as the one of describing the characters, the children helped each other to make a description as detailed as possible. Moreover, they talked to each

	other and compared the characters in the two stories.

3rd session observation grid:

Area of Observation	Description
Motivation	The students were motivated throughout the session. In addition, working more deeply on the issue of gender and stereotypes made them all feel excited and curious to know more things. Apart from that, the activity where the vocabulary was worked on in different ways with the flashcards (first showing only a small part, and then turning them quickly) made the children eager to learn, as they considered it an educational game.
Comprehension	Children were able to describe the protagonists of the two stories and compare them. Moreover, the children used the vocabulary to say qualities of each Little Riding Hood. On the other hand, in the activity of recognizing the vocabulary of the flashcards, most of the children recognized the words. From the children's interventions, it could be seen that they understood the meaning of the words.
Behaviour	Children were attentive throughout the session and asked all the doubts they had. However, they asked fewer questions, as they had acquired more

	vocabulary and understood more of the two stories.
Participation	Learners participated in all the activities. In the activity of describing the two protagonists, the vast majority of students wanted to make contributions. In the last activity, where a debate was established on the topic of gender, the children explained the own experiences or things they had been told about the topic. Specifically, one child explained that in his country there were many differences between men and women, and that he saw that there was no such radical discrimination here.
Use of vocabulary	Everyone tried to use the vocabulary as much as possible. In fact, in the activity of making descriptions and comparing the protagonists, the children used the vocabulary worked on. As a curiosity, when this activity was being carried out, one child knew what he wanted to say but could not remember how to say the word in English, so he decided to ask for help and say it in English rather than in his own language mother tongue, Catalan.
Interactions	During the session there were all kinds of interactions. Also, since most of the activities were oral, learners talked and made comments.

Appendix 9: Assessment grid

	🙂	🙂🙂	🙂🙂🙂
Motivation and interest	Children have not been motivated or shown interest.	Children have been quite motivated and have shown some interest.	Children have been motivated during all the sessions and have shown great interest.
Participation	Children have not participated in the different activities that have taken place in the classroom, that is to say, their participation has not been active.	Children have participated in some of the activities that have been carried out in the classroom. Their participation has been quite active.	Children have participated at all times in the activities carried out in the classroom. Their participation has been completely active.
Use of vocabulary	Children have not used the vocabulary worked on during the activities.	Children have used the vocabulary worked on in some activities.	Children have used the vocabulary worked on in most or in all the activities.
Gender topic	Children have not felt any interest in the topic of gender.	Children have felt a certain interest in the topic of gender, and they have made some comments.	Children have felt a special interest in the topic of gender, and they have made contributions and explained their own experiences.