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A Study of Student Reactions and Attitudes to Non-traditional Pedagogy in Very Early Language Learning

This article presents the introduction of a new instructional tool for Initial Teacher Education at "St. Kliment Ohridski" University of Sofia in Bulgaria. The aim of the study was to train undergraduate students of Early Childhood and Foreign Language Teaching in the Narrative Format (NF) model of Early Second Language Learning for one academic year, and to conduct research into the effectiveness of the model as an educational tool at university level. Students practised their newly acquired skills by teaching English on a weekly basis to over 200 small children from university partner nurseries, schools or in a home environment. The results of the impact of the model on raising teacher trainees' efficacy beliefs and their perceptions of language proficiency are described in the article "The Efficacy of the Narrative Format Model in Early Childhood Teacher Preparation" (Sofronieva, 2012). This article presents the results of the research into students' opinions of the new model and course evaluation. With regard to this issue, our hypothesis was that the methodology course would be evaluated positively by the students who had studied it, and that it would be viewed as a useful university module.

The Narrative Format model of early foreign language learning and teaching was developed by prof. Traute Taeschner from Sapienza University of Rome. Because it is loved by all children who learn languages with their new friends Hocus and Lotus – the two main characters of the stories of the model – the NF model is often referred to as *Hocus and Lotus*. It has been diffused in many countries and won numerous awards (e.g. the Golden Prize at the Lifelong Learning Awards in Berlin, 2007; the prize for

Best Educational Cartoon from the Unicef Jury, 2005; the prize for Best Soundtrack at the Dervio International Cartoon Festival, 2002, etc.). "Children who experience the Narrative Format model acquire a second language naturally, and, given time, can reach a level of fluency in the second language which matches that of their mother tongue. The model has been developed in five languages: English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish. It is designed for five years of instruction (for each language) and is suitable for nurseries and primary schools or the home environment." (Sofronieva, 2012, p. 29–30).

The NF model responds to the need for new working methods covering both theory and practice in the field of early foreign language teaching. It equips language teachers with a consistent and holistic language methodological framework which can fully develop children's foreign language acquisition, their physical, emotional, and psychological growth and simultaneously enhance teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. It is not only suitable for specialized language teachers but for teachers who lack the necessary fluency in the language they teach. It has demonstrated that it has the potential to facilitate the development of the key skills which are important for developing a sense of success in teachers. It provides a viable alternative to training which relies more heavily on theories (important though these are) inherent in the more academic training normally found in university departments, and thus also addresses issues of teacher quality, readiness, and self-efficacy.

In her book "The Magic Teacher", Taeschner (2005) describes in detail the theoretical principles of the model, which are rooted in concepts that have a psychological nature, such as affection, good communication, narration, the use of verbal and non-verbal means of communication (e.g. gestures, facial expressions, voice intonation, gaze direction, etc.). The book also presents the research results of 120 Italian teachers who were trained in and applied the model with their pupils from 1997 to 2000. Since then, a copious amount of research in various countries has been conducted which confirms the results of the project implemented in Italy and the effectiveness of the model. Views from thousands of classrooms provide continual evidence for children and teachers' language progress

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(for more information on the NF model see also the official website: <http://www.hocus-lotus.edu/>).

In 2009, Sofia University specialists took steps towards introducing it at university level in Bulgaria, and regarded it as a tool that could help students on their route of professional development as future language teachers, and would increase their self confidence, readiness to enter the teaching profession and satisfaction.

Participants and procedures

First and second year students (n = 79) in Pre-school Education and Foreign Language (English) and Pedagogy of Mass and Art Communication (English) were trained in the NF model and applied it in their work with children for one academic year. The students represented the entire population of students on the two BA programmes with the English language who followed the same language curriculum. The training on the NF model was embedded into their general linguistics classes and further applied during their university practice in partner nurseries – both required courses on the curriculum. At the end of the year the students were invited to complete an evaluation questionnaire in Bulgarian on a voluntary basis. To avoid anxiety and to ensure truthful responses, the questionnaire was anonymous. On average 10–15 minutes were allocated to the completion of the task during the final class session of the academic year. All students who attended the class completed the questionnaire. Altogether 68 responses were collected. One form was incorrectly filled, so 67 responses were entered into the final analysis which represented 86% of all students who studied the course.

Of all the respondents, 59 were females (88% of the group) and 8 were males (12% of the group). The mean age of the students in the group was 20.04 (S.D. = 1. 25; range 19–25). Of all the participants, 41 students (61%) were in their first year of university studies and 26 students (39%) were in their second year of studies. In the group, 42 students (63%) were students in Pre-school Education and Foreign Language Teaching

(PEFL-English) and 25 students (37%) were students in the Pedagogy of Mass and Art Communication (PMAC- English).

The Instrument

Evaluation Questionnaire

The instrument was designed to conform to the university model and to match the methodology. It tackles a few separate areas of interest and comprises 12 evaluation questions (listed as Q11–Q22 on the original form)[1] projected to cluster on 5 indicators: course satisfaction, effectiveness of training, effect on children, empathy: fantasy and perspective taking, and perception of methodology. Questions were developed in a way that would force a choice (yes/no) in students' responses, or would be responded to on a 4-point Likert scale. Further comments and recommendations on the methodology course were initiated as an open invitation to participants to share opinions or comments.

RESULTS

To check our hypothesis, which stated that the majority of the group of students who had been trained in the Narrative Format model would accept and evaluate positively the innovative instructional tool that had been offered to them at the university level, we analysed the data collected in the evaluation questionnaire. Responses to Question 1 are presented separately as the item referred to the same construct that is measured by Question 2 on Indicator 1. Means and SD of the scores on

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[1] The first ten questions (Q1–Q10) are part of a separate form filled in by the students along with the evaluation form, which collected data on students' demographic characteristics (presented in this study as well), their self-efficacy beliefs and perception of language proficiency. For simplicity, we will refer to the 12 evaluation questions as being numbered from 1 to 12 in this article.

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the 5 indicators were computed. A detailed report on the question items, the measurement scales and data on the generated scores on the indicators is presented below. The mean and standard deviation and the frequency distribution of scores on each indicator are displayed in the graphs that follow.

Question 1 "Have you found the course useful?" The responses required a "yes/no" answer. The results showed that 66 students (99%) found the course useful and only 1 student did not.

Chart 1: Percentage distribution of yes/no responses on Question 1
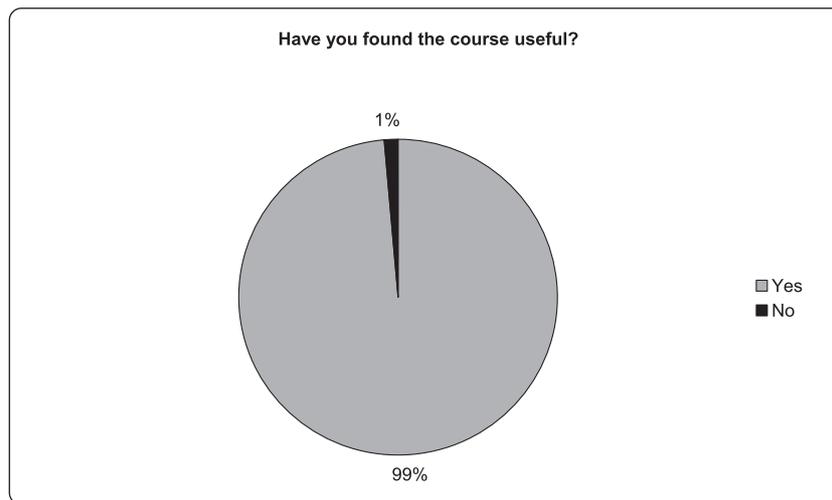
INDICATOR 1 – COURSE SATISFACTION

Question 2 "How useful did you find the course?" (1–4)
1) not useful at all   2) not very useful   3) useful   4) very useful

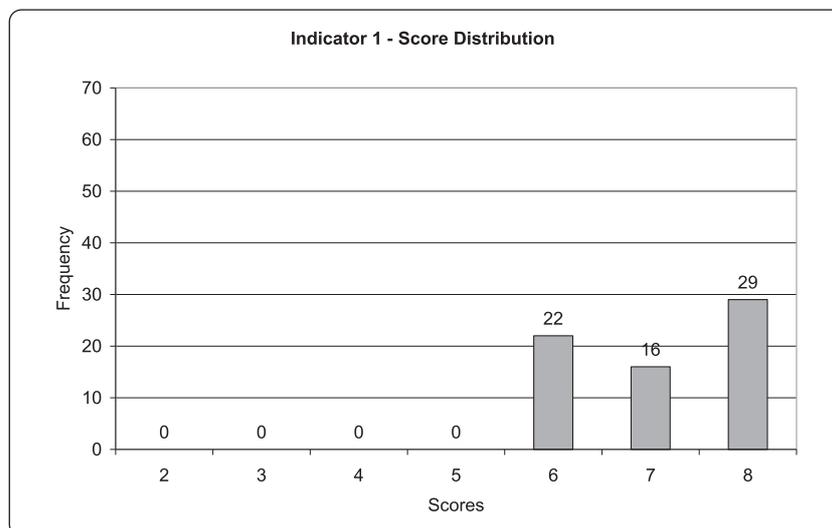**Question 12** "What is your overall satisfaction with the university course?" (1–4)
1) not at all satisfied   2) not very satisfied   3) satisfied   4) completely satisfied

Score range: 2 min.–8 max.

Graph 1: Mean and SD of scores on Indicator 1

Indicator 1 - Course Satisfaction
Mean and Standard Deviation

◊ 7.10

Scores

8.00
7.00
6.00
5.00
4.00
3.00
2.00

Course satisfaction - entire sample

Graph 2: Frequency distribution of scores on Indicator 1

Indicator 1 - Score Distribution

Frequency

70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0

| 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 22 | 16 | 29 |

2   3   4   5   6   7   8

Scores

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As can be clearly seen in the above graph there were no values of 2 to 5 received on this indicator. Students' responses showed that they found the course either useful (46.3%) or very useful (53.7%) and were satisfied (43.3%) or completely satisfied (56.7%) with it.

INDICATOR 2 – THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TRAINING

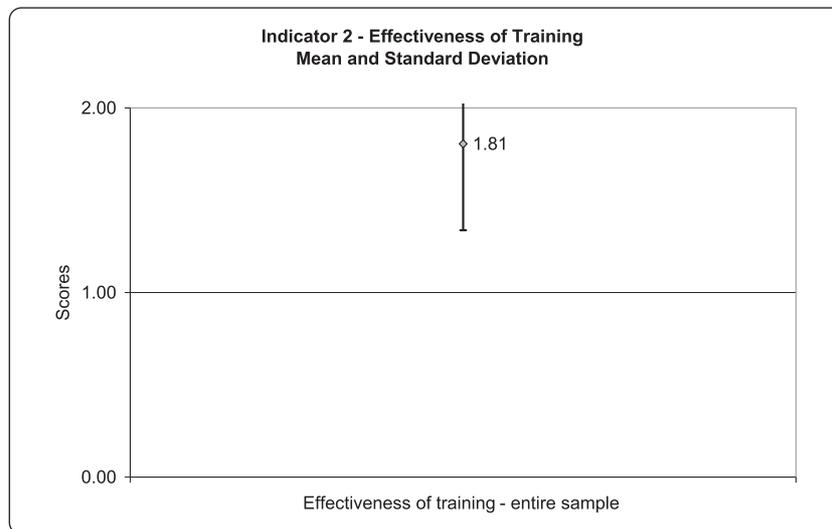**Question 3** "Did the course help you to feel better prepared to teach languages to children?"
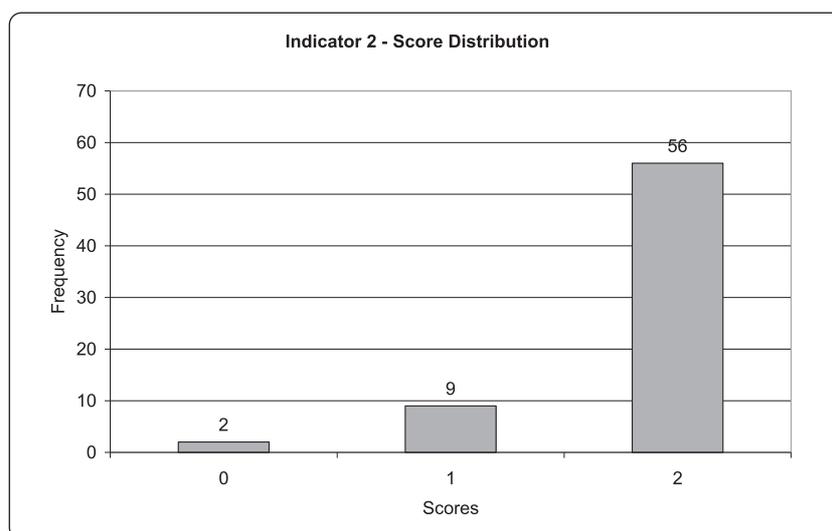
Yes / No (1–0)

Question 4 "Has studying for the course influenced your teaching style?"

Yes / No (1–0)

Score range: 0 min.–2 max.

Graph 3: Mean and SD of scores on Indicator 2

Indicator 2 - Effectiveness of Training
Mean and Standard Deviation

2.00

◇ 1.81

Scores

1.00

0.00

Effectiveness of training - entire sample

Graph 4: Frequency distribution of scores on Indicator 2

A large majority of the students (95.5%) stated that the training course helped them to feel better prepared to teach languages to children, and 85.1% reported that it influenced their teaching style.

INDICATOR 3 – EFFECT ON CHILDREN

Question 5 "Did your work with the children on the Hocus and Lotus model have a positive impact on your communication and relationship with the children?"

Yes / No (1–0)

Question 6 "Do you think that the children you work with can learn foreign languages more effectively with this model?"
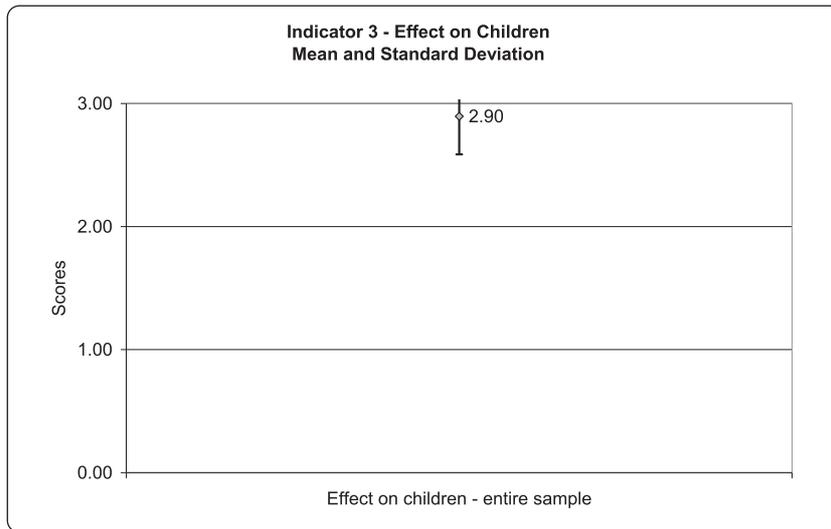
Yes / No (1–0)

Question 7 "Do you think that the method is a positive experience for the children you work with?"
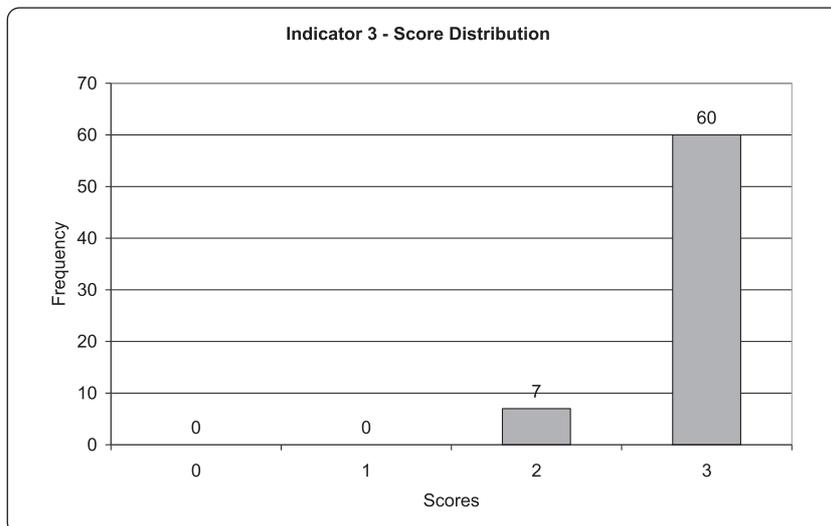
Yes / No (1–0)

Score range: 0 min.–3 max.

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Graph 5: Mean and SD of scores on Indicator 3

**Indicator 3 - Effect on Children
Mean and Standard Deviation**

Scores

3.00 ◊ 2.90

2.00

1.00

0.00

Effect on children - entire sample

Graph 6: Frequency distribution of scores on Indicator 3

Indicator 3 - Score Distribution

Frequency

70

60 — 60

50

40

30

20

10 — 7

0 — 0   0

0   1   2   3

Scores

All the students, with one exception, (98.5%) answered affirmatively to the first question on the indicator. The next question generated 91.0% affirmative responses. All students (100%) reported that the NF model was a positive experience for the children.

INDICATOR 4 – EMPATHY: FANTASY AND PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Question 9 "Did you find it easy to transport yourself in the world of fantasy during Hocus and Lotus classes and practice?"
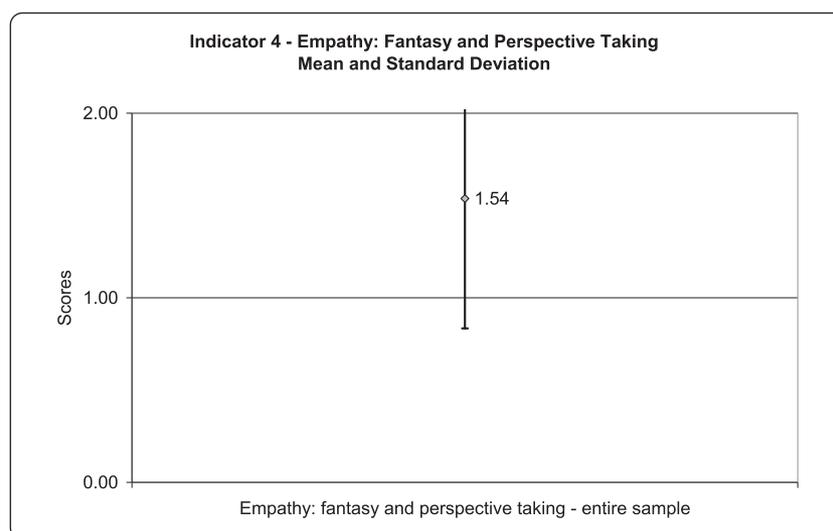
Yes / No (1–0)

Question 10 "Did you find it easy to put yourself in the shoes of the different characters of the narrative format?
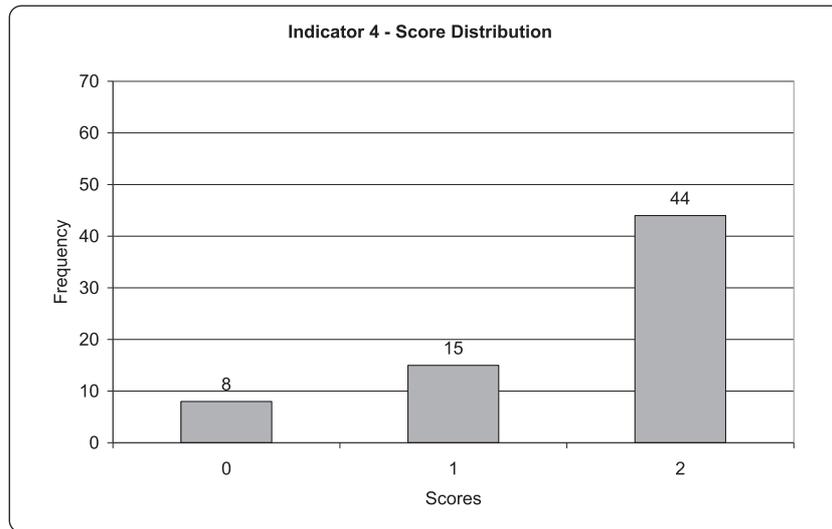
Yes / No (1–0)

Score range: 0 min.–2 max.

Graph 7: Mean and SD of scores on Indicator 4

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Graph 8: Frequency distribution of scores on Indicator 4

Indicator 4 - Score Distribution

Frequency	0	1	2

(bar chart showing: score 0 = 8, score 1 = 15, score 2 = 44; y-axis labeled Frequency ranging 0 to 70; x-axis labeled Scores)

The questions for this indicator were designed to relate to the fantasy and perspective-taking subscales of the IRI (Davis, 1980). They inquired into students' perceptions about their more cognitive empathy skills. We wanted to explore whether students had encountered difficulties when applying these cognitive strategies; these typically occur during the acting out of the narrative stories – a core activity of the model. "FS measures the tendency to identify with characters in movies, novels, plays and other fictional situations" whereas "the perspective-taking subscale contains items which assess spontaneous attempts to adopt the perspectives of other people and see things from their point of view" (Davis, op.cit., p. 2). In the group, 79.1% of the students reported that they had not encountered difficulties on the fantasy component and 74.6% stated that they did not find it difficult to step into the shoes of the different characters in the acting out activity of the formats.

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INDICATOR 5 – PERCEPTION OF METHODOLOGY

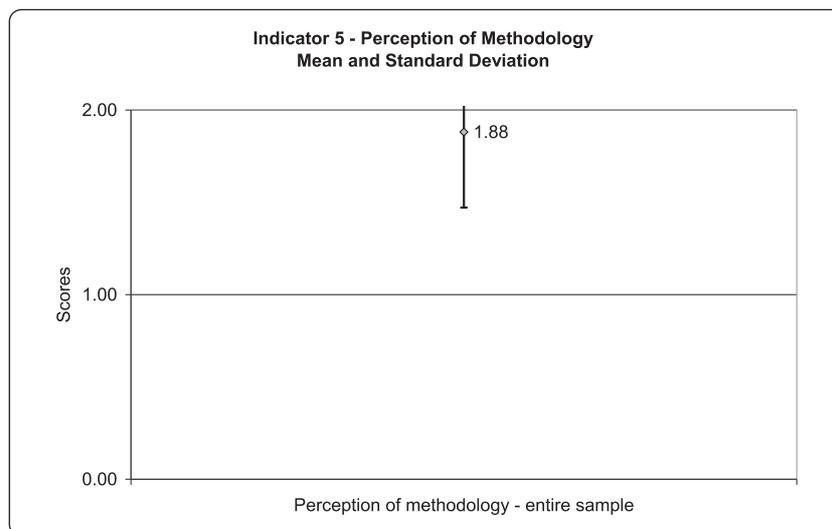**Question 8** "Was the method a positive experience for you?

Yes / No (1–0)

Question 11 "Would you like to continue your studies and work on the methodology in the next academic year as well?"
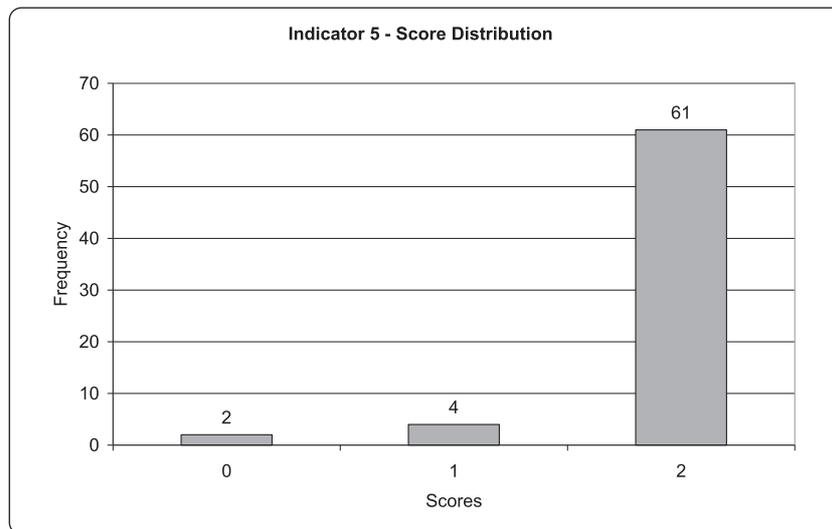
Yes / No (1–0)

Score range: 0 min.–2 max.

Graph 9: Mean and SD of scores on Indicator 5

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Graph 10: Frequency distribution of scores on Indicator 5

Indicator 5 - Score Distribution

Most respondents (97.0%) reported that they had a positive experience and only 2 students did not. The results showed that a large majority of the students (91.0%) expressed their willingness to continue their work and practice on the model in the following year as well.

Additional comments received from students on the evaluation questionnaire

An English translation of some additional comments, received from the students, is presented below. Generally speaking, all the comments praised the method and were extremely positive. They reflected students' own experiences and perceptions as well as some children's responses that the students had received during their combined work.

- *It's a wonderful methodology. For me and for the kids.*
- *Working with you was incredibly pleasant and so was the work with the kids.*

- *It was recharging and positive.*
- *I am very grateful that I had the chance to study this methodology. It helped the children's development and my own. Thank you very much.*
- *The kids' results and reactions say it all – it is a fantastic methodology.*
- *Kids adore Hocus and Lotus. I adore it even more than they do.*

CONCLUSION

Data showed that the students who were trained in the Narrative Format model evaluated the university course and the new model extremely positively with most questions generating between 90%–100% affirmative responses. Our results confirm the positive evaluation of the NF model trainings that have been reported in previous studies (Taeschner, 2005; Colibaba & Gheorghiu, 2011). Given our students' positive perception of the introduction of the model, we feel that we managed to transfer successfully the positive experience of the model onto them and the children. The outcomes in terms of students' raised teacher efficacy beliefs and perception of language proficiency, and children's learning, which are part of separate studies and analyses, proved the usefulness of the introduction of the NF model at the university level in Bulgaria.

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Abstract

This paper presents the introduction of a new instructional tool for Initial
Teacher Education in Early Childhood language at "St. Kliment Ohridski" Univer-
sity of Sofia in Bulgaria. The aim of the study was to train university undergradu-
ate students in the Narrative Format model of foreign language teaching and
learning, and to conduct research into their opinions and evaluation of the course
at the end of the academic year. Our belief was that students' evaluation of the
course that was offered to them would confirm its value as an educational tool.
The results proved that Bulgarian students are in search of, and open to new
working methodologies and classroom practices. As a result of the positive out-
comes and students' extremely positive evaluation of the model, it has been in-
corporated into their university studies and nursery practice for another
consecutive year.

Keywords: early foreign language teaching and training, course evaluation,
the Narrative Format model