

# Drama for Early Years ELT:

Insights from audience participation at varying  
language levels

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1. Genesis of the project
2. Theoretical orientation on Drama and ELT
3. Data analysis and results
4. Implications for language teaching and future directions



- Arose out of Tri-campus Arts Festival
- Three campuses of Nottingham (UK, Malaysia and China) come together to share performances of theatre, orchestra and choir.
- Year 1 (Lakeside Arts, UK): individual performances then group music with some spoken word
- Year 2 (UNMC): individual performances, group choir, then joint production of *1001 Nights*
- Year 3 (UNNC): individual performances, group musical gala, *The Monkey King*



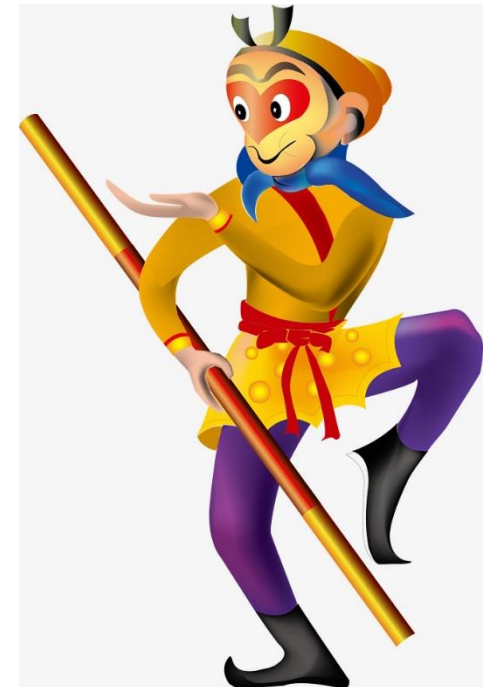
28/10/2018

Derek Irwin, UNNC

# Why *The Monkey King*?

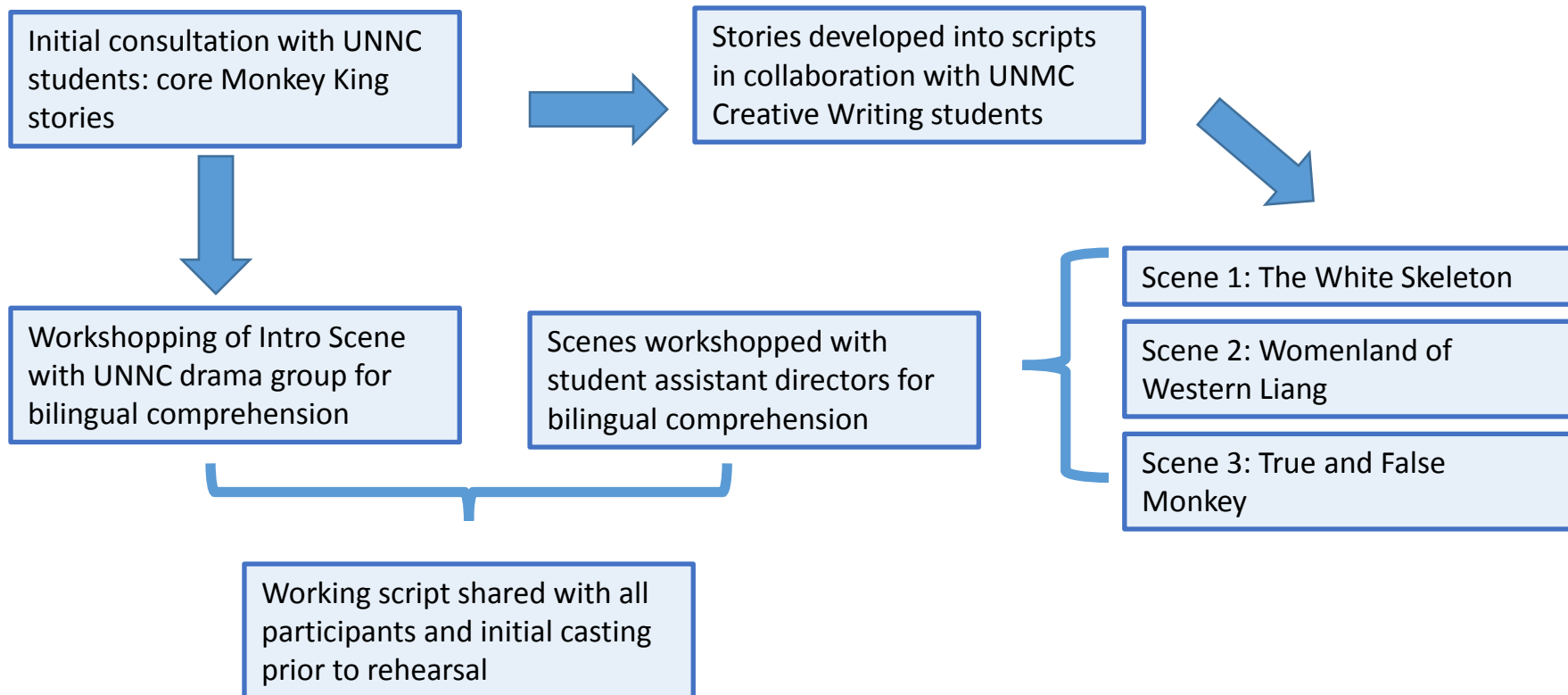


- Shared culture from the China campus, iconic figure
- Immediate familiarity to local audience (1000-seat auditorium!)
- Simply good fun
- But how to stage in 6 days?





1. Show was faked “live”
  - a) Actors were initially the UNNC students trying to figure out what to do with their foreign guests.
  - b) They agree on The Monkey King and the other students arrive.
  - c) A mix of students were “chosen” for the roles, and dressed onstage while orchestra played.
2. Narrator would hold “The Book” so that any forgotten lines could be prompted.
  - a) A different narrator from each campus for each scene.
  - b) Different actors for each role for each scene.
  - c) A director from each campus with each group of students.
  - d) Support from a chorus made up of the rest of the students.
3. Script would be in both English and Chinese, but without direct translation: all actors “understood” what was said to them in both languages.





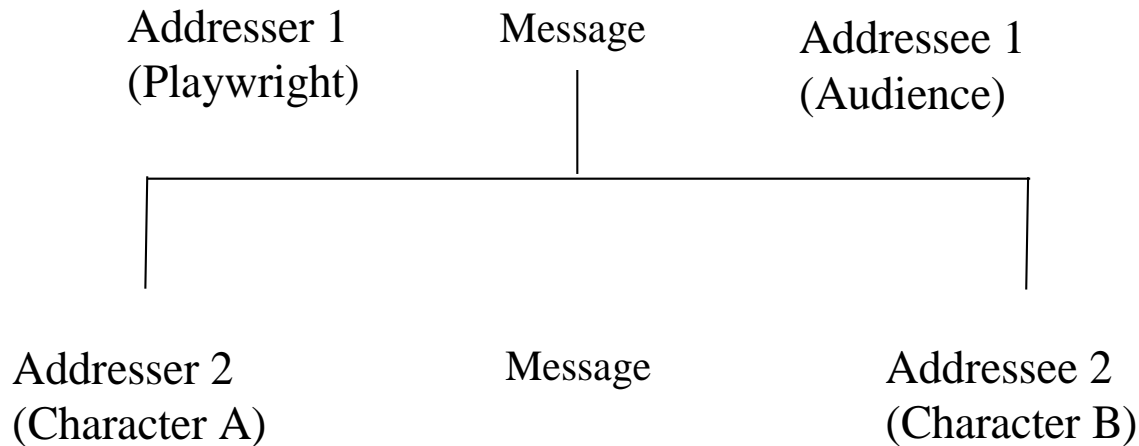
- 6 mornings of rehearsal led to each director putting additional elements into the production.
- The mix of students from all three campuses also led to cultural sharing, and jokes from many perspectives were worked in.
- We also took advantage of a student dance troupe to add in a performance to “Womenland,” brought in the Chinese orchestra for transitions; original poetry from *Journey to the West* was recorded in Classical Chinese, with projected translation and voice-over.



- Out of the 1000 people in the audience, more than 300 of them were children.
- The production was NOT oriented to this audience!
- Loud, often disengaged due to the language, and therefore distracting....
- But it made me realise that there was a potentially large local audience for theatre in English, particularly if it was aimed at the proper level.



*Prototypical drama* is more complex discursively, having at least two levels of discourse, the author-audience/reader level and the character-character level:



(169)

- Bourdieu (1984): “A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded... A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason” (3)
- Children lacking the “code” of language could be brought into a work of art by other modalities...
- Also making use of Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of ZPD: “*the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers*” as measured by productive reaction

- I wanted to experiment with how to engage EFL learners as an audience.
- Local folk had presumed our production would capture the attention of (very young) children – it should thus be possible to adjust it to do so.
- Hypothesis: using my Monkey King script, I could shift the bilingual elements and the orientation to adults towards children.
- Problem: how to gauge the appropriate levels for feedback.
- Solution: action research of an adapted script presented to Middle School (10-12 year old), Primary School (7-10 year old) and Kindergarten (3-4 year old) children.

- Theatre and Audience
- Theatre for Children
- Theatre in Education
- Theatre for ELT (or Theatre and Semiosis; Theatre and Language)



- Wood and Grant's (1997) definitions of how the young audience differs from adults (16-29):
  - Children enjoy being active participants
  - They generate energy
  - They can become over-excited
  - Children enter the spirit of the performance
  - They can be very direct
  - Children let you know when they are bored
  - They respond to direct participation
  - They don't all respond the same way
  - Many don't choose to come
  - The composition of the audience is variable



<http://www.industry.co.id/read/37183/teater-tanah-air-kembali-meraih-yang-terbaik-di-15th-world-festival-of-childrens-theatre>

- They respond to justice
- Reasonable fright
- Healthy subversion
- Logic
- Sometimes different and unpredictable
- They make noise
- Respond to action
- Do not like being patronized
- No romance
- Yes animals and toys
- Story is key!
  
- Inclusion of “Suddenlies”



- To et al (2011): developing teachers via process drama training
- Franks et al (2014): teachers trained by RSC bring techniques into the classroom. Quoting Rancièrè (2009): “Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story” (equality of the interplay, 17)
- Problem: “Knowledge, confidence and interest are essential in teaching arts subjects. A lack of these qualities inhibits teachers’ ability to deliver the contextualising and follow-up activities that so enrich children’s experiences of performances.” (Reason 2010, 11)



- A heightened sense of enjoyment, excitement, fulfillment, and therapeutic release of tensions
- An increase in the knowledge and skills associated with particular art forms
- Enhanced knowledge of social and cultural issues
- The development of creativity and thinking skills
- The enrichment of communication and expressive skills
- Advances in personal and social development
- Effects that transfer to other contexts, such as learning in other subjects
- The world of work and cultural activities outside of school
  - (Harland *et al*, 2000: 565)



- “The experience of being in the audience when a play is being performed is not simply passive. It’s not like watching TV; it’s not even like going to the cinema. Everyone in that big space is alive, and everyone is focused on one central activity. And everyone contributes. The actors and singers and musicians contribute their performance; the audience contribute their attention, their silence, their laughter, their applause, their respect” (Pullman 2004, 29)
- Jackson’s ‘subversive space’ (2007, 192): “a ‘fictive space’ within the classroom where ‘by reshaping, intensifying and fictionalizing experience, the possibility is offered of seeing freshly, with new eyes and new understandings, free from the inhibiting constraints of examinations, institutional authority and externally imposed rules” (146-7).
- “With its smelly socks, snot and underpants, the spell comfortably occupied this territory representing language usually prohibited in a classroom context – rude, transgressive and above all fun. By actively engaging children not only in witnessing these grotesque utterances but also in actively expanding their repertoire, the spell-making activity could be seen to disrupt pedagogical norms, presenting instead a kind of ‘counter-argument’ to what was considered acceptable in the classroom” (Pakkar-Hull 2014, 251).





- “Without the required knowledge and abilities, children and young people will be largely unable to access a production. Or alternatively, they may grasp certain aspects but will be uncomfortable or unable to take the experience onto other levels. The right to culture, therefore, also depends on the fulfillment of a right to knowledge and personal empowerment.” (Pullman 2004, 29)
- On a child “who lacked the *linguistic* competence to understand the performance”: “the children decoded assumed but extremely complex theatrical languages: understanding the conventions of staging, the use of symbols and signs to stand in for the whole, the difference between an actor and a character, the storytelling structures, the development of characterisation and much more.” (Reason 2010, 87)
- “There also exists a growing body of empirical evidence that clearly indicates that when children are enabled to add English to their existing language repertoires and consistently use these combined linguistic resources to learn, they benefit cognitively, socially and personally (Blackledge and Creese 2010, 43; Cummins 2001; Mehrota 1998; Tucker 2008).” (Pakkar-Hull 244)



- Galante (2018): reduction in anxiety
- Rothwell (2011): kinaesthetic learning is crucial to beginner language learning
- Galante and Thompson (2017): fluency greatly helped, comprehensibility somewhat, and accentedness not benefitted by a drama vs. traditional language approach.
- Ntelioglou (2011): situated practice creates identity texts, which lead to investment and therefore gains in the classroom. Multiliteracy and multimodality approach.
- Cloete et al (2015) found in translational blended theatre classroom project *productive mistranslations*, which were due to the transnational nature and could be used to open up cultural conversations.
- Pakkar-Hull (2014) a study of UK monolingualism and attempts to empower speakers of other languages in that milieu: “For more than 30 years, drama has been promoted as a valuable teaching tool for language learning (e.g., Kao and O’Neill 1998; Winston 2012) and recent research results have reinforced this position from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Cheng and Winston 2011; Dunn, Bundy and Woodrow 2012; Ntelioglou 2011; Stinson and Winston 2011).” (246)

- Warta (2002) in Indonesia found some gains in using drama for EFL instruction.
- Ilyas (2016): “Given the advantages of using drama in the EFL classroom shown by these studies, there is little information concerning the use of drama in the Indonesian EFL” (200).



*Mencari Rimba* at The World Festival of Children's Performing Arts, Tokyo 2016

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/youth/2016/07/22/indonesian-musical-to-perform-at-childrens-festival-in-japan.html>

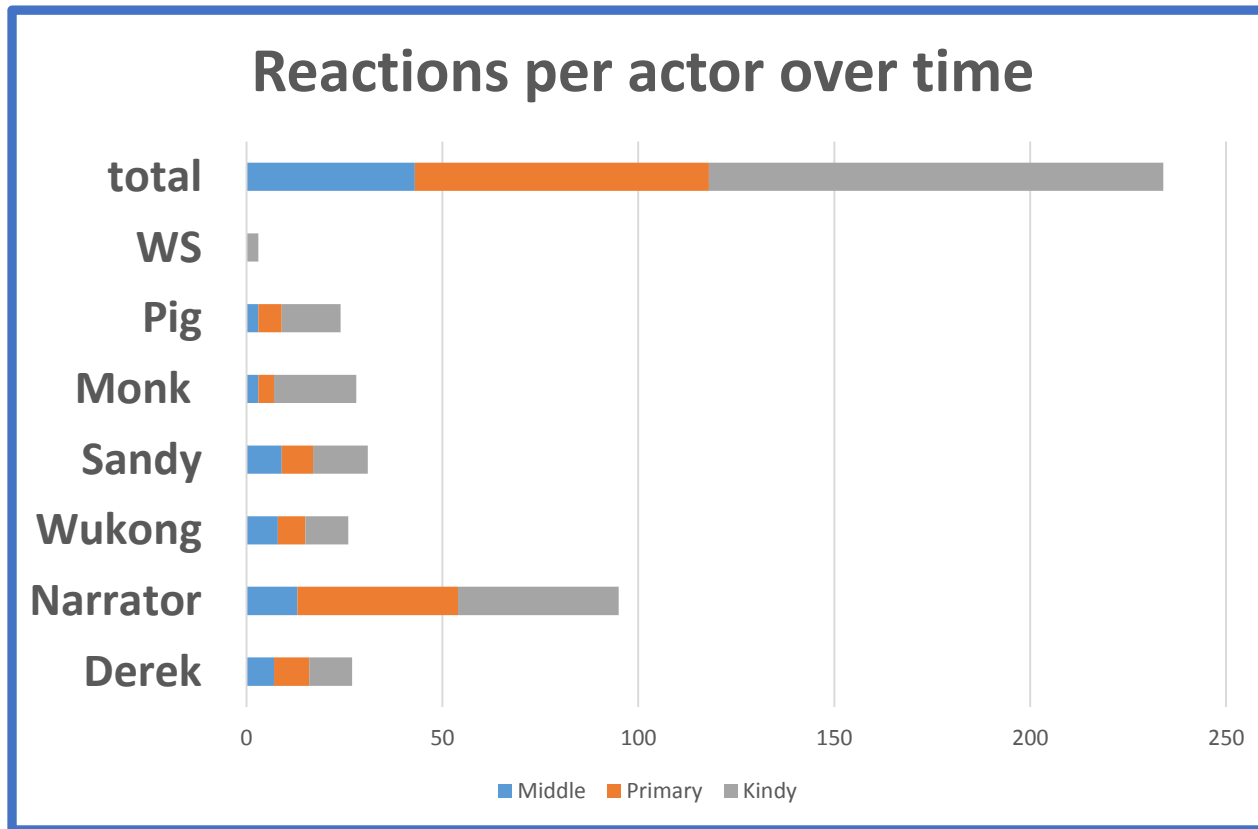
- 3 different performance groups (with a previous performance at University Open Day for practice)
- In time:
  1. Middle School (85 students)
  2. Primary School (63 students)
  3. Kindergarten (91 students)
- Performances all began with my warm-up, followed by 20 minute show and then audience questions



- Video 0005, 14:15
- “We were a bit worried before that the children wouldn’t respond to the actors and everyone would be awkward, but they turned out to be really energetic and interested in it! I believe the warm-up activity Dr. Irwin led was the key. Chinese kids are always taught to behave themselves in class, however, this time he addressed them, cheering rule No.1 ‘Don’t be quiet! Talk to us!’ The kids’ interaction with the actors later on was quite substantial.” (Narrator)
- “The children's reaction was amazing. They learned something, and the show helped them to review some words. My expectation was there would be no reaction from the students, but the reality was really amazing.” (Crew)

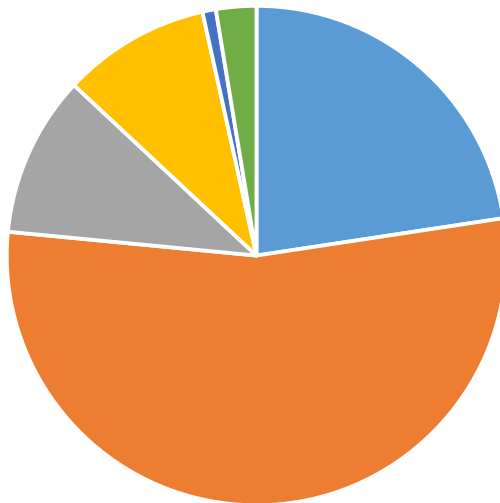


- At a very basic level, much more participation from the younger crowd: 116 instances (kindergarten), 75 instances (primary) and 43 instances (middle school)
- Some potentially confounding variables:
  - Play was re-written with primary in mind
  - Actors had more experience by youngest group
  - The older the group, the more English, but also the more “audience” training (and training in school environment)



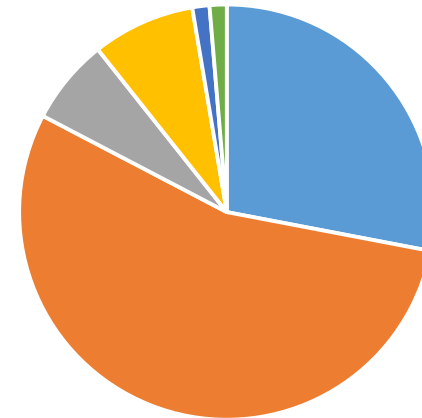


## Kindergarten

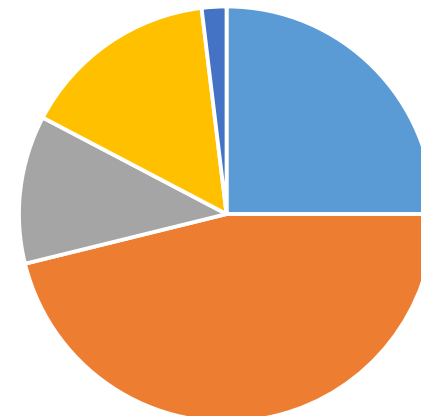


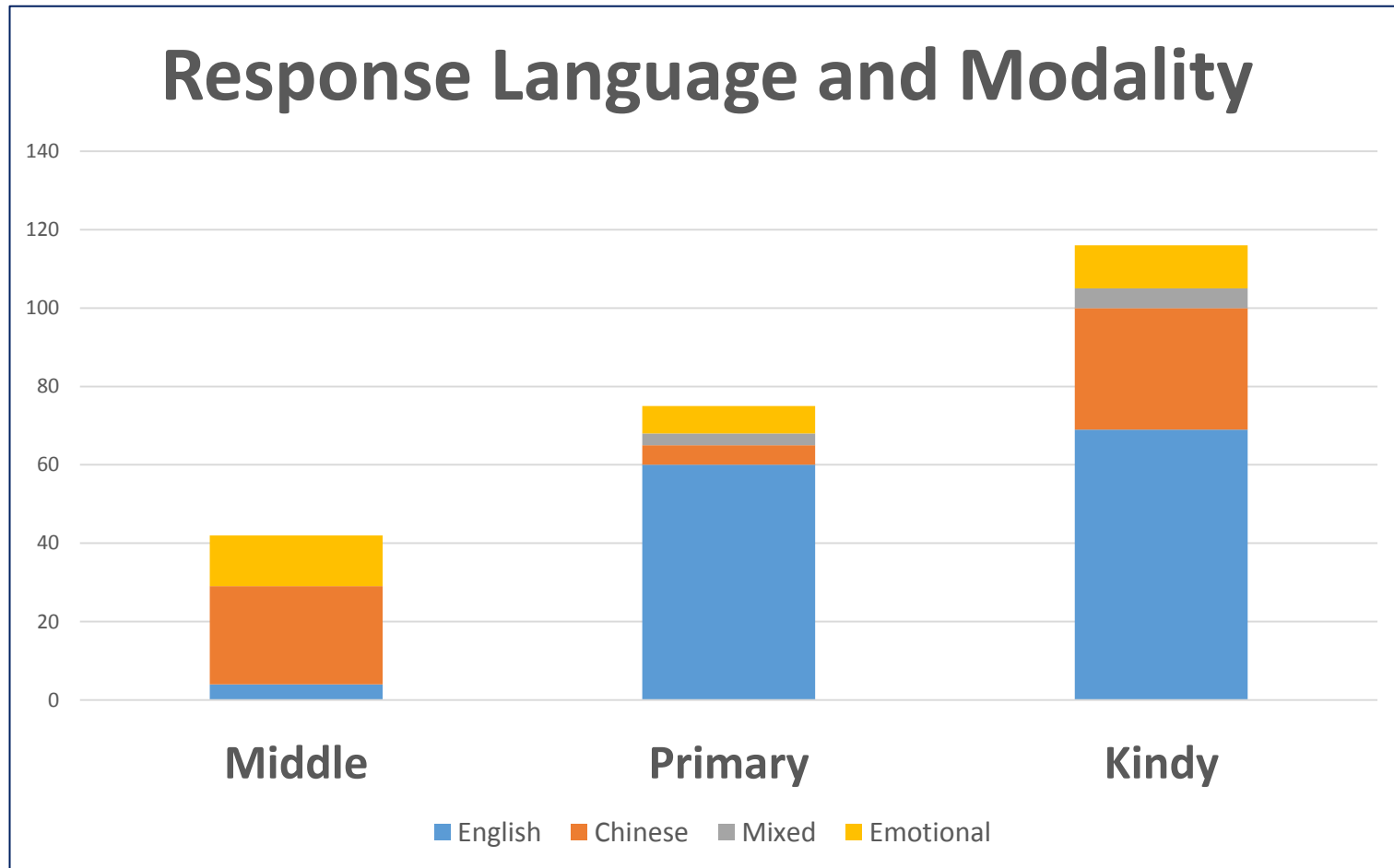
- answer
- repetition
- response
- emotional
- greeting
- warning

## Primary

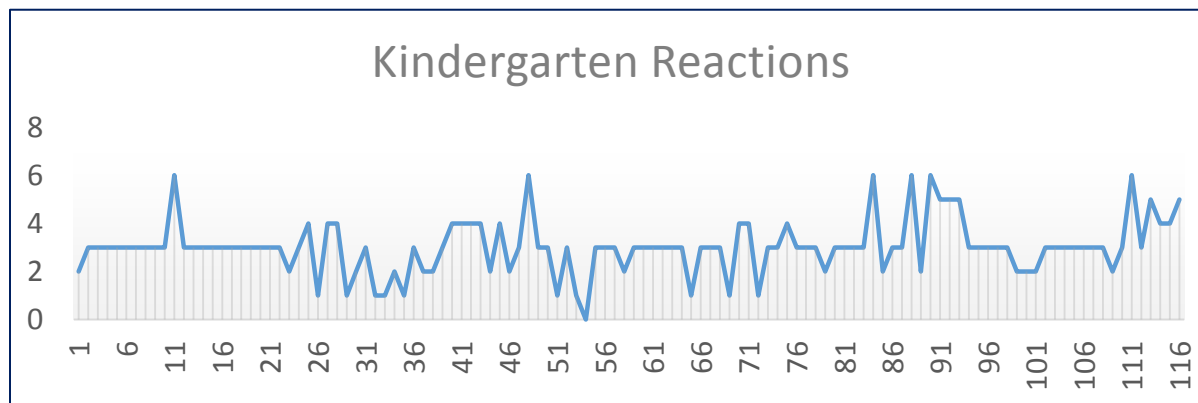
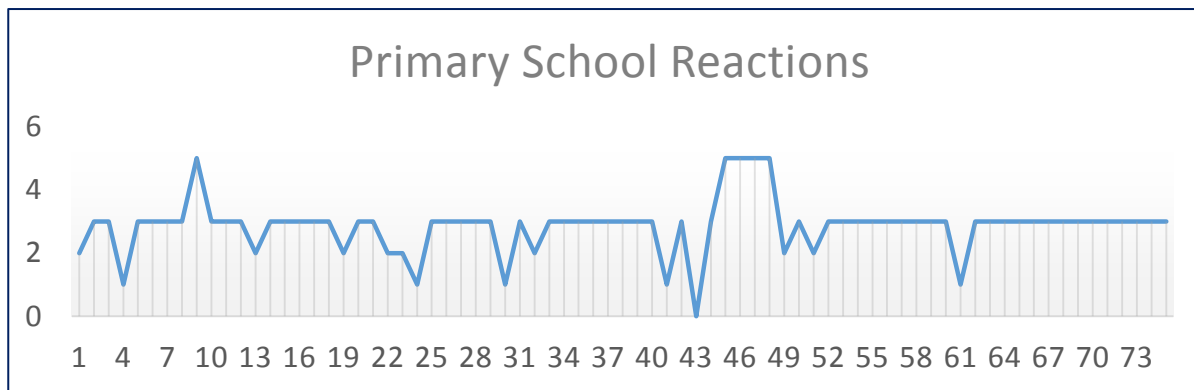
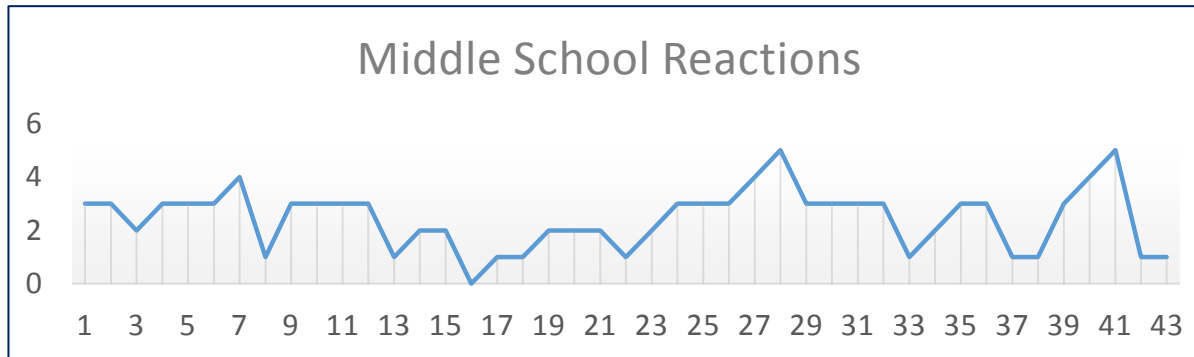


## Middle





# Intensity:





- Middle school:
  - Silence on certain prompts
  - Laughing at inadvertent ‘jokes’ (Monkey pulling peaches out of his pants)
- Primary:
  - A fair amount of translating, including back to Chinese
  - Consistent answering in English, even to Chinese prompts
  - Yelling at Pig, but in English (“You are so bad!”)
  - One prompt reacted to with acknowledgement (“Ah!”)
- Kindergarten:
  - Kids jumped ahead to identify Pig (in Chinese)
  - Screams when White Skeleton came in (happy fright)
  - Determined to show Wukong the peach forest (they spotted the props)
  - On two occasions (yelling at Pig) 1 child started and all joined in



- Different groups did react to different things, but all enjoyed it.
- Older children spent a bit more time in reflective rather than reactive response.
- Peaks:
  - Kindergarten screaming at gross items, and getting Monk Tang to stop
  - Primary was the same, but also reacting to me
  - Middle School peaked at end of play (Good/Bad Monkey) but also had more emotional response



- In order to employ theatre techniques, necessity of teacher training paramount.
- Therefore needs social acknowledgement of importance of the arts in both education and pedagogical approaches.
- Reiterative cycle of reception and production is most likely to lead to superior results.
- Learning is allowed to be fun!

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