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Can children passionately feel with a little snail?

International children's understanding of and involvement in *The Lucky Snail*

An IZI study with 97 children from 6 countries investigated to what extent children engage in the intended interpretation of the Swedish clip *The Lucky Snail*, and whether they get emotionally involved.

A small snail creeps slowly up a railway track, when a train whistles to signal its approach. The snail continues calmly on its way, but the train comes closer and closer. Will the snail make it?

Intercut images of snail and train combined with encouraging comments from the narrator and warning signals from the locomotive increase the tension, until, at the dramaturgical climax, the train sweeps past. It leaves behind an empty railway track, and the Swedish narrator asks: "Did the snail make it?" Of course the little snail survives, as shown by the final close-up of the snail in the grass.

The 1-minute real-life clip made by the Swedish broadcaster SVT was taken from the preschool series *What's that* which deals with environmental and nature topics. The short story follows a classical 3-act schema with an exposition, an arc of tension with a climax, and the release of tension. The dramaturgical structure implicitly invites viewers to imagine themselves into the snail's situation, to get emotionally involved, and finally be released from tension. What do children make out of the story? Do the invitations to act support the young viewers in their understanding of the story?

The study

97 children between the ages of 2 and 12 from 6 countries (Canada, Colombia, Germany, Mongolia, Nepal, Philippines) were filmed viewing the clip, which had subtitles in English. The children's reactions were evaluated at 3 different points in time, with regard to their "attentiveness", "emotional involvement", and "relief at the survival of the snail".¹

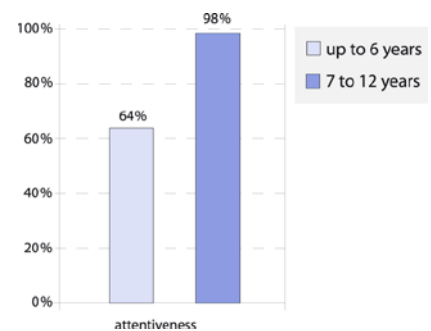
A snail attracts attention and affection

The introduction shows the protagonist of the story, the snail, in a close-up, and expects the child viewer to focus his or her attention on the little creature (cf. ill. 1). Of the preschoolers, two thirds focus their attention on the screen, while the school children nearly all do so (cf. graph 1).

Nearly one third of the children comment on the image, and some smile or laugh at the same time. Nearly twice as many older children as younger ones comment when the snail ap-



Ill. 1: The little snail



Graph 1: Children's attentiveness while viewing *The Lucky Snail*, compared by age

pears. 4 8- to 9-year-old girls from Canada, for example, utter a long-drawn-out, enraptured "Aw" as soon as the snail enters the picture. One of the girls adds a long-drawn-out "Cute", and then declares: "Snails are cute though." The difference in the 2 age groups can probably be attributed to the shortness of the first scene, since the younger children take longer than the older ones to decode the image. The level of attentiveness is very high.

Mainly 7- to 12-year-olds get emotionally involved in the main part

The train whistles, and can be seen from far off. The narrator explains: "A train is coming." He asks what will happen. This is followed by a series of rapidly changing images, with close-ups of the snail and the approaching train. The connection between the snail and the train which is thus created, and the encouraging comments of the narrator (which are

also reproduced in the English subtitles), aim to get the viewers emotionally involved. The snail seems to have nearly made it when the train sweeps by.



Screenshots from "Guessing Game 2012" on *The Lucky Snail* © SVT, Sweden/IZI

Ill. 2 and 3: The Canadian girls become emotionally involved in the snail's fate and cheer when it succeeds

The action invited in the first part is to get emotionally involved and feel empathy with the snail. 63 % of the children follow this interpretation, which is encouraged by the image sequence and the narrator's comments: the Canadian girls, for example, repeatedly call out "Oh no!" or "Don't! No!" during the alternating close-ups of the train and the snail. One girl covers her face with her hands, another wraps her arms around her body and grimaces (cf. ill. 2). 4 Colombian boys (7 to 11 years) lie on the couch with half-open mouths, eyes sometimes wide with excitement. One raises his hand to his forehead in excitement and only drops it again after the happy ending. Here too, more older children show empathy with the snail (cf. graph 2), and 30 % more older than younger children make further comments on what is happening.

The story established in the image sequence is easy for them to understand and emotionally stirring for many of them. The preschoolers act in a different way; nearly half are distracted and inattentive, for example 4 Nepa-

lese boys who look around and move restlessly. The story, told through an associative montage, does not seem to work so well for young children, though the linguistic barrier also plays a part: the older children, if they can read and understand English, can read the subtitles and thus obtain more information about the story. The younger ones are dependent on visual and acoustic associations and take longer to grasp the meaning of the story.

Mainly girls show relief when the snail survives

The third part of the story initially maintains the tension dramaturgically, with a shot of an empty train track and the narrator's question: "Did the snail make it?" This is followed by the release of tension in the form of a close-up of the snail in the grass, alive and well. "Yes, fortunately! The snail made it!"

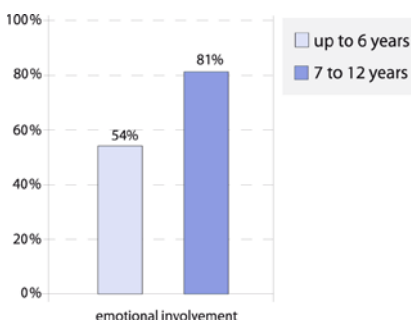
The action invited here is to feel relief and joy at the survival of the snail. In the reception there is comparatively little to observe here, even age dif-

ferences scarcely emerge. There are, however, definite gender differences: 30 % of the girls and 2 % of the boys are visibly relieved (cf. graph 3). All 4 girls in our Canadian group call out "Yeah!" at the happy ending and laugh. One girl throws up her arms and all seem relieved (cf. ill. 3).

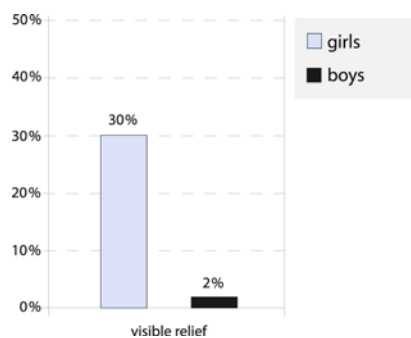
Conclusion

The children willingly engage with the story and show empathy, even if the main character is a small snail, and the sequence is only 1:08 minutes long. Overall, the associative, montage-style narrative worked, and the children accepted the invitation to act; school children generally more so than preschoolers. "Only" half of the 3- to 6-year-olds were visibly emotionally involved in the story. We suggest the following interpretation: unless the voice-over provides interpretative pointers which are comprehensible for the age group, younger children will only partially understand stories presented in an associative style. ■

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Graph 2: Children's emotional involvement when viewing *The Lucky Snail*, compared by age



Graph 3: Children's visible relief when watching *The Lucky Snail*, compared by gender

NOTE

¹ The data collection took place in groups of 3 to 7 children, mainly at home. In the study "Guessing Games 2012" the children watched 19 or 22 programme clips with a total length of 24 or 26 minutes, and were filmed doing so. For the evaluation, the images from the clip being viewed were inserted into the videos of the reception (screen-in-screen), and the children's reactions were observed at the same time as the material being viewed.