What is it like to hang out with a refugee?
The content of host-society children's imagined contact with refugee children

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INTRODUCTION

Imagined contact hypothesis assumes that even just imagining a pleasant contact with an outgroup member can improve intergroup attitudes (Crisp & Turner, 2009), and research suggests that interventions based on imagined contact could be useful in the preparation of host-society children for intergroup contact with refugee children (Smith & Minescu, 2022). However, even though the success of this intervention depends on the quality of imagined contact situations (Miles & Crisp, 2014), little is known about the content of these imagined interactions, especially when it comes to children. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the content of host-society children's descriptions and drawings created during an imagined contact intervention, and to assess the frequency with which identified topics occur.

We have conducted a four-sessions-long imagined contact intervention, with each session consisting of four steps (in line with Vezzali et al., 2012):
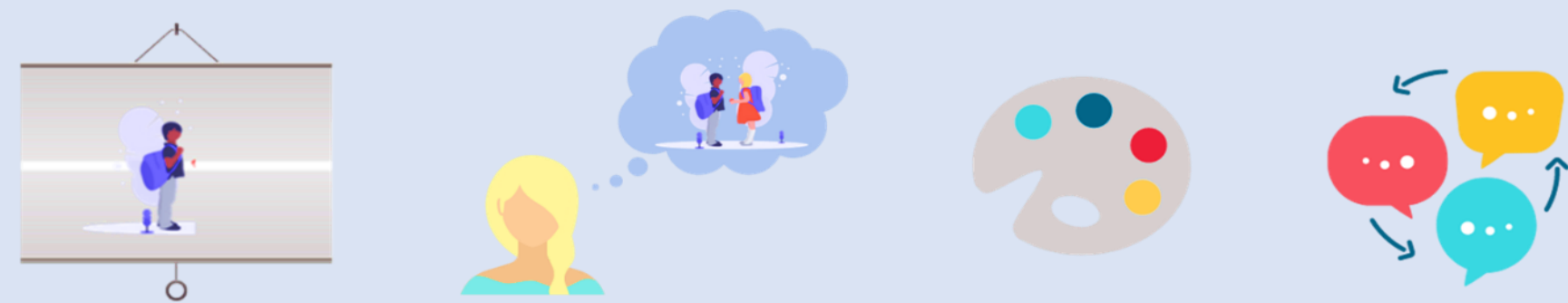
1. Children are informed about their task, as well as who they will be imagining.
2. The teacher reads a scenario describing how contact with a refugee child began, and children imagine the contact on their own. Scenarios differed from session to session.
3. Children participate in some form of individual reinforcement of imagined contact effects – writing a description on drawing a comic about the imagined encounter.
4. Children take part in the class-level discussion aimed at reinforcing the effects of imagined contact.

METHODS

Intervention was conducted in 28 elementary school classes in Croatia, who had no experience in refugee children integration. A total of 478 pupils aged from ten to fourteen took part in imagined contact intervention. We used a quota sample, which ensured that the number of children in different grades is approximately equal, as well as the number of boys (N = 233) and girls (N = 242).

This study focuses on children's output from the third step of the intervention. During the first, second and fourth session children have written short descriptions of contact with a refugee child (total N = 1251), and in the third session, they have drawn a comic describing the imagined encounter (N = 412). Examples of outputs are shown on the right.

All outputs were coded by two independent coders. They determined whether the communication was successful, whether the children described having intentions for future contact, as well as whether any prosocial behaviours towards refugee children were mentioned. Outputs were also coded for modes of communication used and kinds of prosocial behaviours exhibited. Coders used pre-determined categories, but could also add new ones if deemed necessary. These additional analyses are thus considered more exploratory.

I was walking in the school playground and I was bored. (...) Then we remembered [we could organise] the sports competition. I was in a group with a girl my age. I didn't know her, but I heard that she is a refugee and that she doesn't speak Croatian very well. She had brown-green eyes and dark, black hair. First we played tug of war, and our group won. We communicated in sign language. We played a few more games and won each one. We celebrated the victory with ice cream. I got a vanilla ice cream, and the girl got strawberry ice cream. I was happy that we were together in the group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
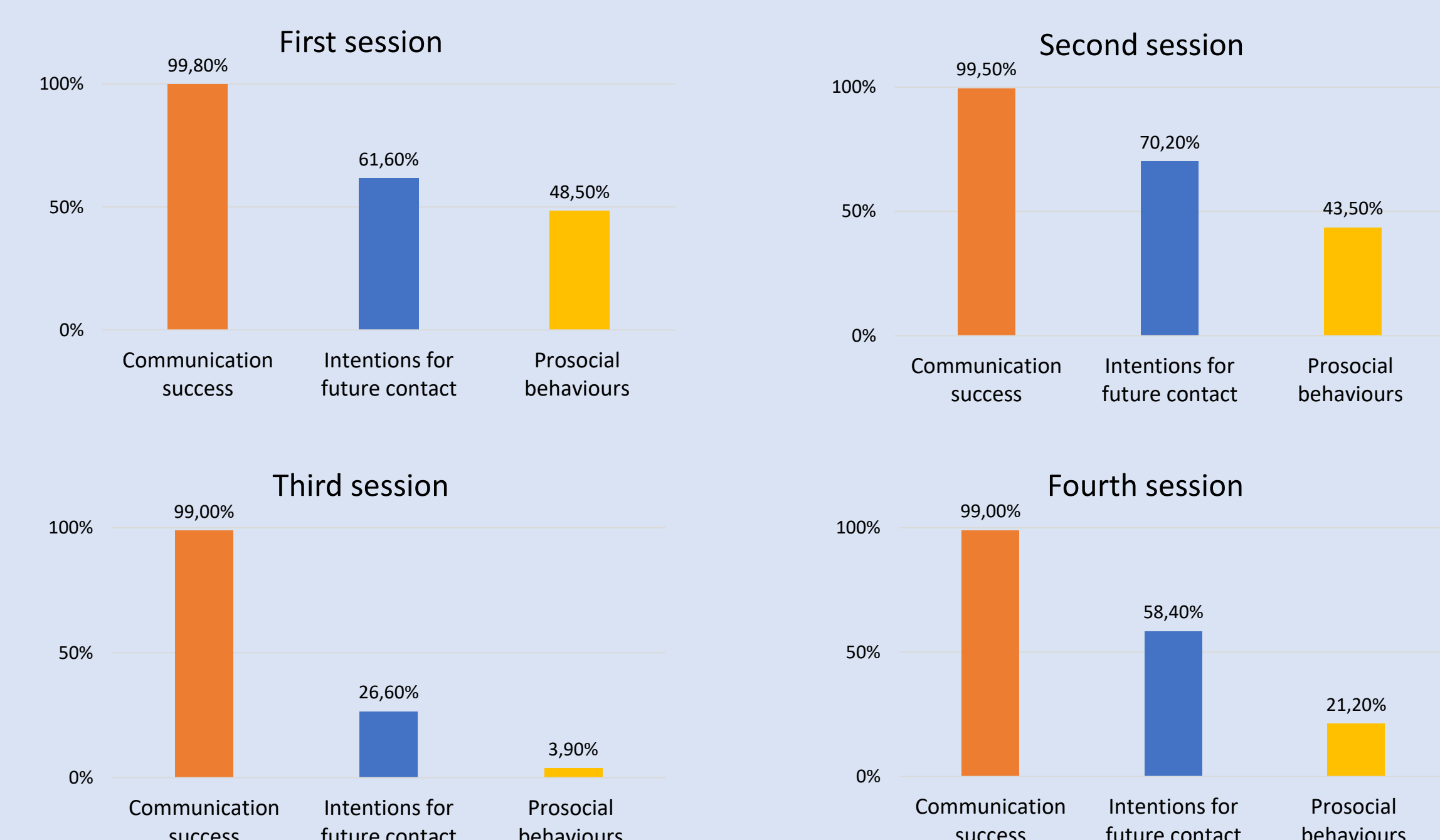
PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

Every output was checked in order to assess whether the children followed the key instructions of imagined contact, which involved imagining an **interaction** (i.e., hanging out, talking) with **a refugee child** (i.e., not with a host-society peer) that was **positive** (i.e., not neutral or negtive). For each session, every output that did not follow the instructions was excluded from further analysis. The proportion of excluded outputs ranged from 6.83% in the fourth session, to 8.51% in the third.

Inter-rater reliabilities for communication success, intentions for future contact and prosocial behaviours were acceptable, and disagreements were resolved by a third coder. Percentage agreementss ranged from 77.97% for the assessment of intentions for future contact in the first session, to 99.50% for the assessment of communication success in the same session.
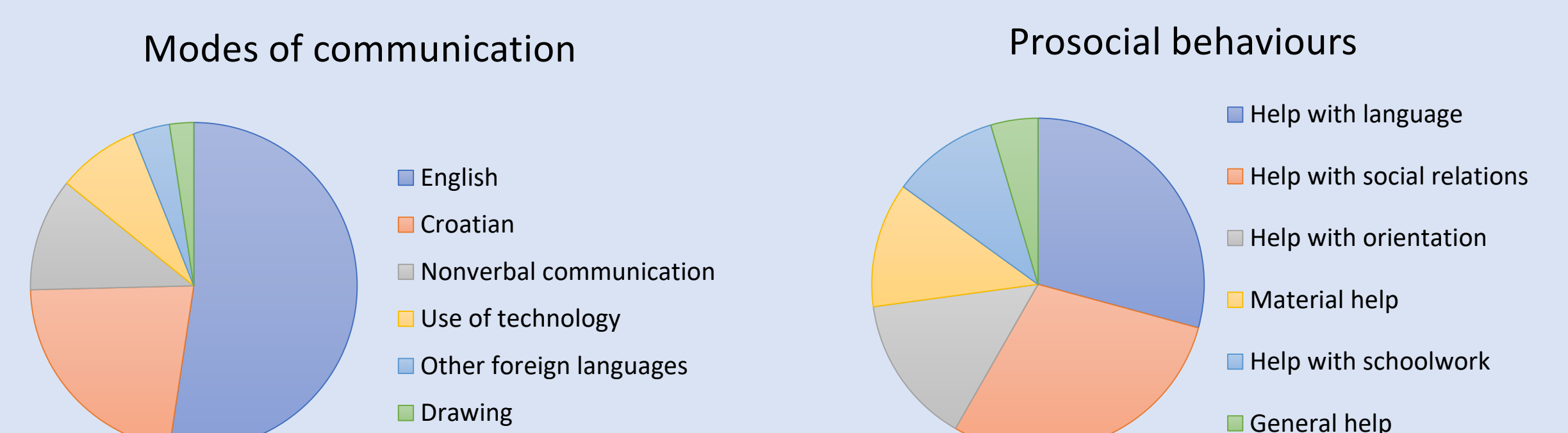
MAIN ANALYSIS

The results show that virtually none of the participants describe unsuccessful communication with an imagined refugee child, which suggests that children perceive themselves able to bypass the language barrier in order to hang out with a refugee child. In addition, children's imagined interactions often prompted them to write about their intentions to hang out with an imagined refugee child in the future (on average mentioned in 54.20% of outputs) and their readiness to provide different kinds of help (on average mentioned in 29.28% of outputs).

Furthermore, as shown in the graphs on the right, across sessions having intentions for future contact with an imagined refugee child was brought up more often than prosocial acts. This pattern was evident in all sessions, even though the percentage of children mentioning those topics somewhat varied between sessions. The most pronounced difference in the frequency of occurence for the two categories is observed in the third session, which can probably simply be attributed to the fact that it was more difficult to express these categories through comic, than through written descriptions.

First session
- Communication success: 99,80%
- Intentions for future contact: 61,60%
- Prosocial behaviours: 48,50%

Second session
- Communication success: 99,50%
- Intentions for future contact: 70,20%
- Prosocial behaviours: 43,50%

Third session
- Communication success: 99,00%
- Intentions for future contact: 26,60%
- Prosocial behaviours: 3,90%

Fourth session
- Communication success: 99,00%
- Intentions for future contact: 58,40%
- Prosocial behaviours: 21,20%

ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

Graphs below show the ratios of communication modes and kinds of prosocial behaviours for all four sessions combined, but similar patterns are also found for each session separately.

Modes of communication
- English
- Croatian
- Nonverbal communication
- Use of technology
- Other foreign languages
- Drawing

Prosocial behaviours
- Help with language
- Help with social relations
- Help with orientation
- Material help
- Help with schoolwork
- General help

CONCLUSION

Above all, this study suggests that even host-society children without previous contact with refugees can imagine successfully communicating with refugee children, and that their imagined interactions often include positive characteristics, such as plans for future contact and different kinds of prosocial behaviours. These results also illustrate the positive expectations that host-society children have for interacting with refugees and suggest that children can be creative in finding ways to communicate with and offer help to refugees.

References:
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