

Puppets in Primary **Denise Özdeniz**

As a teacher at an English medium pre-school, I use puppets, both commercially produced and student made ones, in class on a weekly basis because I have seen for myself that they work . As a teacher trainer I encourage teachers to experiment with puppets because many practising primary and pre-school teachers have told me of the success they have had with them. This article is a practical account of:

- a) Why I use puppets in class,
- b) Inexpensive puppets your students can create for themselves
- c) How to introduce your students to using puppets
- d) Classroom procedure for two activities using puppets

For the purposes of this article I will refer to the teacher as “she” and students and puppets as “he”. I will also assume that the teacher holds the puppet in her right hand, a minor but important detail for those of you who wish to visualise the teacher/student, puppet, prop interchange.

a) Why Use Puppets in the Primary Classroom?

- **Two fluent English speakers in class are better than just one**

Puppets introduce another proficient English speaker into the classroom for the teacher to speak to. This is important, as one natural language learning strategy adopted by children is that of observing and then imitating conversations conducted by the people around them. Small children can often be heard rehearsing dialogues with their toys. The puppet allows this 3 dimensional dialogue modelling to take place in the classroom. For example, imagine that the teacher wishes to demonstrate how to ask for a coloured pencil in English. She places a red pencil and a blue pencil to the right of the puppet (Out of reach of her left hand to necessitate the pencil being passed to her by the puppet) , then turns to him and has the following dialogue:

Teacher	“Homer, can I have a pencil please?”
Puppet	“Yes, what colour?”
Teacher	“Red please”
Puppet (Handing over pencil)	“Here you are”
Teacher	“Thank you”

The pencils are then placed on the far left of the teacher and the roles are reversed. Homer asks for the pencil and the teacher passes it to him. After modelling the dialogue again the teacher invites a child to come to the front and take one of the roles, whilst the teacher speaks for the puppet.

In my experience, young children are very keen to do this. They rarely experience performance anxiety and any embarrassment they do have is greatly reduced by the fact that they view the puppet as a being half way between the teacher and themselves.

- **Puppets help create a genuine information gap**

A key tenet of the communicative approach to language teaching is that genuine communication involves a purpose such as giving someone information or getting them to do something. Real communication centres on an information gap for when we genuinely communicate we usually do not know everything that the speaker is going to say. We may be able to predict a percentage of what they will say, but there will always be attitudinal information that is new to us. This “genuine information gap” is difficult to create in a classroom of elementary learners who have worked together for a period of time because

- a) the students have discovered a lot about each other through observation and through conversations in their mother tongue
- b) the students have a limited number of patterns and lexical sets at their disposal restricting topic variety.

Therefore, an alternative to asking for and giving personal information about classroom members is to get the students to exchange information about their puppets as the puppets can come from anywhere in the world, have any name their creator wishes and have a whole gamut of likes, dislikes and hobbies.

- **Hands on is minds on**

Children learn experientially through getting visually, aurally and kinaesthetically involved in a subject. Puppets are bright and colourful, tactile and moving. They engage the child as a whole person bringing in several of Gardner’s multiple intelligences (Modern English Teacher Vol 10/1 January 2001: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Mustafa Zülküf Atlan) especially emotional, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal. This increases the children’s interest in the lesson and leads to deeper learning.

- **Children can feel more confident when talking through the puppet.**

Some children feel hesitant to speak in English because they are unsure of the pronunciation of certain words or of exactly how to express themselves. In such cases puppets can act as a psychological support for a child. When a child speaks through the puppet, it is not the child who is perceived as making errors but the puppet and children find this liberating. Hence, puppets can encourage your students to experiment more with the language and “have a go” when they may have otherwise remained silent.

B. Inexpensive puppets your students can create for themselves

a. Plastic plate puppets and cardboard triangle puppets

Children draw or stick a face on the top half of the plate or triangle and clothes on the bottom half. Make a stick from a rolled up newspaper or a strip of cardboard folded in half lengthways to provide extra support. Attach the stick to the back of the plate or triangle.

b. Tube puppets

Cut a two centimetre slit in either side of a toilet roll tube and from a separate piece of card cut a circle at least 7 cms in diameter. Children draw the puppet’s face on the flat circle and

its body on the toilet roll tube. Finally, children slot the face onto the body using the two slits cut previously.

c. Card strip hanging puppets

Photocopy a character from a book, cut a character from a colouring in book or draw a character. Stick the paper on card for support if the paper is thin. Cut a strip of card approximately 20 cms in length and 2 cms in width. Stick the bottom of the card strip onto the back of the puppet, at the top. Children hold the top of the card strip so that the puppets hang down in the same fashion as string puppets do.

C. How to introduce your students to using puppets

Children need to be gradually prepared to use puppets in class in much the same way as they need to be warmed up for writing or roleplay. I have learned through experience that it is not enough to simply give each child a puppet and say “have a conversation.” Here is a gradual process through which the child- puppet relationship can be established and strengthened over several weeks.

3 steps in introducing children to puppets

Step1. work in the private sphere



Step2. work in the public sphere using fixed roles



Step3. work in the public sphere using original roles

Step 1: work in the private sphere

1a. Aim: to encourage the child to view the puppet as a special friend who he can talk to in English

We all know that a teacher should never ask students to do what she will not do herself. Therefore, have your own puppet as a special friend. Introduce yourself to the puppet in front of the class. For example, I would say “Hello, my name’s Denise. I am a teacher. I have two children called Melisa and Tamara. I live in Istanbul and I love gardening. Next, have the children introduce themselves to their puppets from the privacy of their own seats. No one will be listening to them as everyone is talking to their own puppets at the same time. It should be regarded as a fluency activity, with no need for teacher correction. With real beginner students this stage can even be carried out in L1.

1b. Aim: to help the child give the puppet a unique identity.

Have your puppet tell you about himself in front of the class. My puppet usually says “Hello, my name is Lucy. I come from Brasil. I am seven years old. I have a brother called

Carlos and a puppy called spot. I love going to the beach.” As with step 1a, allow all of the puppets to speak to their own puppeteer simultaneously.

Step 2. work in the public sphere using fixed roles

Aim: to instill confidence in the children when using puppets in front of a group

Choose a well known action song such as “10 green bottles hanging on the wall” or “head shoulders knees and toes”. Have the children make their puppets dance and do the actions as the class sing. For example, when singing “ten green bottles hanging on a wall” I have ten children stand up and hold their puppets up high. As we sing the line “and if one green bottle should accidentally fall” the child I point to lets his puppet fall down.

Step 3. Working in the public sphere using original roles.

Aim: to use puppets for communicative language work.

Tell the children that they are taking their puppets to an international holiday camp. At the camp they will meet puppets from all over the world. Brainstorm the language of giving and asking for personal information e.g. “what’s your name?”, “where are you from?”, “how old are you?” etc. Give the class planning time so that each child can recall or invent the necessary personal information about his puppet. Finally, the children walk around the classroom introducing their puppets to other puppets and collecting as much personal information about them as possible. If your children need more practise producing the language patterns they need to carry out this fluency based mingle activity, extend the planning stage by getting the children to copy down the personal information questions you brainstormed earlier. The children then answer the questions using the “I” form, as if they were their puppet.

D. Classroom procedure for two activities using puppets

In this section, I would like to present 2 activities using puppets which you may like to try out in class.

Activity One. I’m Hungry (Adapted from Pebbles By Penny Hancock & Gail Ellis Longman)

Materials required. A card strip hanging puppet as the main character

A strip of card approximately 20 cm long and 2 cms wide per child

A square of paper per child

Coloured pencils per child

Language aim: To practise “have got” + food vocabulary

Teacher holds the puppet up and mimes that it is very hungry.

Teacher elicits that the puppet is hungry and asks what it likes to eat.

Children offer suggestions e.g hamburgers, apples, pizza

Teacher asks children to draw a picture of something the puppet can eat on the square of paper. Literate children can also label their picture.

Children attach the strip of card to the top of their picture in order to make a card strip hanging puppet/prop.

Teacher calls children out to the front saying “Ali, what have you got for (puppet’s name) to eat?”

Child hangs his food puppet in front of the teacher's puppet and replies "I've got a"
Teacher repeats the process with the other children.

Alternative suggestions:

The above technique can be used in exactly the same way for the following scenarios and language items

- ❖ The birthday party: language aim: "Here's a + toy lexis."
It is a puppet's birthday. The children make gift props which they give to the puppet saying for example "Here's a car".
- ❖ I'm bored: language item "You can play with + toy lexis"
The puppet is bored. The children make a toy prop which they give to the puppet saying for example, "You can play with my doll"
- ❖ Where's my teddy bear: Language aim: "Is it + prepositions of place. The puppet is in a lounge . He can not find his favourite teddy bear. Children make props of places the teddy bear might be e.g under the table, behind a cushion.
Children approach the puppet asking "Is it in the cupboard?." The answer is always no as the teddy bear is stuck on the back of the puppet. Eventually. the puppet turns around with his back to the children .On seeing the teddy bear children shout out "It's behind you"

Activity Two: Little House using tube puppets.

(See section B b above on how to make tube puppets.)

Materials required:

An open topped cardboard box, decorated to look like a house.

Tube puppets for the following characters: Mr Mouse, Mr Frog, Mrs Fox, Mr Rabbit and Mr Bear.

(The little house is in the middle of the stage)

Mr Mouse (Looking at the house) What a lovely little house!. Little house, little house, who lives in little house? (Mr Mouse jumps into the house)

Mr Frog: (Looking at the house) What a lovely little house!. Little house, Little House, who lives in Little House?

Mr Mouse: I'm Mr Mouse. I Live in Little House. Who are You?

Mr Frog: I'm Mr Frog.

Mr Mouse: Come in. (Mr Frog jumps into the house)

Mrs Fox: (Looking at the house) What a lovely little house!. Little House, Little House, who lives in Little House?

Mr Mouse: I'm Mr Mouse

Mr Frog: I'm Mr Frog.

Mr Mouse & Mr Frog: We live in Little House. Who are You?

Mrs Fox: I'm Mrs Fox.

Mr Mouse & Mr Frog: Come in. (Mrs Fox jumps into the house)

Mr Rabbit : (Looking at the house) What a lovely little house!. Little House, Little House, who lives in Little House?
Mr Mouse: I'm Mr Mouse
Mr Frog: I'm Mr Frog.
Mrs Fox: I'm Mrs Fox
Mr Mouse , Mr Frog & Mrs Fox: We live in Little House. Who are You?
Mr Rabbit: I'm Mr Rabbit.
Mr Mouse, Mr Frog & Mrs Fox: Come in.
Mr Squash You All Flat Bear: (Stomps up to the house) Who lives here?
Mr Mouse: I'm Mr Mouse
Mr Frog: I'm Mr Frog.
Mrs Fox: I'm Mrs Fox
Mr Rabbit: I'm Mr Rabbit.
Mr Mouse, Mr Frog, Mrs Fox, Mr Rabbit: We live in Little House. Who are you?
Mr Squash You All Flat Bear: I'm Mr Squash You All Flat Bear.
Other animals: Oh no. Run away! (Animals jump out of the house. The bear turns the box over and and stomps on top of it as if trying to break it up. After bear leaves all the other animals return to the house.)
Mr Mouse, Mr Frog, Mrs Fox, Mr Rabbit: Poor little house. We can rebuild Little House. (Re-right the box and put the animals back into it.)
Mr Mouse: I'm Mr Mouse
Mr Frog: I'm Mr Frog.
Mrs Fox: I'm Mrs Fox
Mr Rabbit: I'm Mr Rabbit.
Mr Mouse, Mr Frog, Mrs Fox, Mr Rabbit: We live in Little House.
The End.