

Student-Produced Puppet Shows in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

The universal appeal of puppets makes it worthwhile for teachers to find a way to incorporate them into the language classroom. For instructors who are looking for a dynamic class activity that will motivate their students and inject some fun in their lessons, student-produced puppet shows might fit the bill. There are various reasons for using puppets in the language classroom. Puppets allow students to practice the new language with less anxiety, inhibition, and fear of making mistakes. Students can become aware of the importance of the subtleties and nuances of body language and gestures as they try to make their puppets come alive. In addition, students can learn about foreign cultures if their puppet show is based on a story from a foreign country. Students can also build their vocabulary. Another benefit of staging a puppet show is that because it is a performance, the students can learn about the importance of keeping the audience in mind as they write the script. Perhaps just as important as any of the above reasons, puppet productions make the act of teaching much more enjoyable and manageable. This paper serves as a brief guide to incorporating student-produced puppet shows in the language classroom.

Introduction

Puppets seem to have a universal appeal; people all over the world enjoy watching puppet shows, whether they involve *bunraku* puppets in Japan, shadow puppets in Indonesia, water puppets in Vietnam, rod puppets in Italy, or the Muppets on Sesame Street. There is something magical when a skilled puppeteer infuses inanimate objects with life. It is worthwhile for teachers to find a way to incorporate this magic into the language classroom. For instructors who are looking for a dynamic class activity that will motivate their students and inject some fun in their lessons, student-produced puppet shows might fit the bill.

I have incorporated the use of puppets in my English speaking classes. I divide the classes into several groups of about four or five students each and give them the task of producing a 5 to 10 minute puppet show in English. They have to write the script for a short puppet play in English, and they have to make the puppets, scenery backdrops, and props by themselves. In all of these classes, the students have enjoyed the challenge, and I have been very pleased with the level of creativity and originality demonstrated in their productions.

Why Puppets?

Puppets allow students, particularly shy ones, to practice the new language with less anxiety and less fear of making mistakes. If a mistake is made, in a sense it is the *puppet* that makes the error, not the puppeteer. The puppet is similar to a mask, in that it provides the speaker with a bit of anonymity. This indirect form of communication, speaking through a puppet, has the effect of reducing inhibition in the puppeteer. Ackerman (1993) claims that the puppet is:

a dynamic tool for developing language communication skills with both children and adults. A puppet is an extension of the personality, but it has greater freedom to express this personality. It can go where the person is afraid to go; it can speak with mistakes without worry (p. 63).

Canepa (1994) reinforces this concept when she writes:

Many ESL students have to break through a ... shyness barrier when trying out the new language. Once behind the [puppet stage], they find the courage to speak up and take the risks involved, especially when they've created a voice that doesn't even sound like their own (p. 88).

Puppets, because they seem to reduce a speaker's inhibition, are utilized by child psychologists to get children to speak more freely about traumatic events in areas ranging from sexual abuse and divorce. Puppetry in counseling gives children a deep feeling of safety (Carter, 1987). If it is true that anxiety and fear of making mistakes are impediments to language acquisition, then the use of puppets may be one technique to reduce these factors.

Another advantage of using puppets in a language classroom is that they can increase the level of fun and motivation in the class. First of all, the element of play induced by working with puppets can help to reduce any negative attitudes in the class. Secondly, allowing students to exercise some creativity in the classroom is motivating. Maley and Duff (1982) say this motivation results naturally from "imaginative personal involvement" (p. 13). Thirdly, college students seem to enjoy group activities a lot, and their collective participation in a challenging performance-based project usually result in a very positive experience in the target language.

Working with puppets can result in the students learning other things beside oral language skills. For instance, students can become aware of the importance of the subtleties and nuances of body language and gestures as they try to make their puppets come alive. While puppeteers often use exaggerated gestures, it is often the subtle movements that make a puppet more interesting to watch. In addition, students can learn about foreign cultures if their puppet show is based on a story from a foreign country. Moreover, students can build their vocabulary. In putting together a puppet production, students will find that they need new vocabulary words, whether they are particular items or supplies they need in order to make a puppet or expressions

and words they need when writing a script. When students experience a need for a word, they are more likely to learn it.

Another benefit of staging a puppet show is that because it is a performance, the students can learn about the importance of keeping the audience in mind as they write the script. What will the audience understand? What will they find to be appealing, interesting, and funny? What words and expressions can they use to best convey the story? Developing a sense of audience is an important aspect of the communicative approach to language teaching.

Perhaps just as important as any of the above reasons, puppet productions make *the act of teaching* much more enjoyable and manageable. For instance, when the students are working on their scripts, it is much easier for a teacher to give feedback to a small number of groups as opposed to many individual students. Furthermore, teachers will find themselves having fun and feeling more involved with the students while giving them assistance in their productions. Teachers will enjoy watching their students' creativity and hard work come to fruition. I have often been pleasantly surprised by the students' resourcefulness, imagination, and sense of humor. All of these things inject a sense of vitality into the learning process that is often sorely missing in language classrooms.

Starting Out

A certain amount of preparation is necessary before you introduce this activity to your students, especially if this is your first time. First of all, it is imperative to make a few puppets to show the students. You do not need to be a master artist or craftsman to make a puppet that will serve as a good example for the students. Simple puppets built out of paper or old socks are probably best in terms of feasibility and time. If you have no creative ideas, take a look at puppetry books or find a puppetry website on the Internet for inspiration.

You will also need to construct a puppet stage, which I like to bring to class when introducing the project. When the students see the stage, they start developing a clearer vision of what they will be doing. The stage I use with my students consists of four panels (cloth-covered wooden frames), each roughly 120 centimeters in height and 70 centimeters in width (see Figure 1). The panels are joined together (Velcro works nicely) and the outer panels are set at 135° angles to the middle two panels so that the entire contraption does not fall over. The resulting stage can easily accommodate three kneeling puppeteers. Large pieces of cardboard can be used in similar fashion. Finally, poles can be attached to both ends of the stage, with a length of string or wire running from the top of one pole to the top of the other. This string or wire is used to support any scenery backdrops used in the puppet shows. When you construct your puppet stage, I recommend that you design it to be easy to disassemble so that it is portable and no problem to store away for future use.

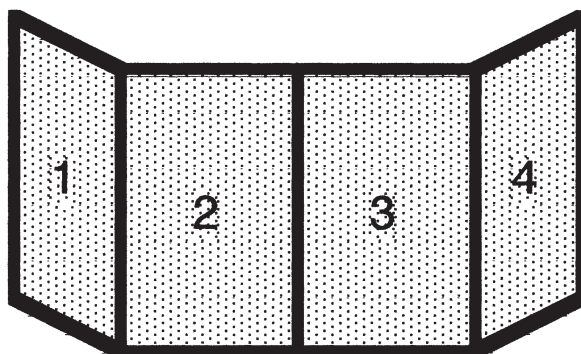


figure 1: 4-panel puppet show stage

When introducing the puppet show project to your students, try to do it in a way that excites and challenges them. I bring to class some of the more interesting puppets I have made, as well as a few puppets that former students have made and given to me. Next, I show a videotape of a student-produced puppet show in order to demonstrate to the students that they too can successfully produce one of their own. After viewing the video, the challenge is put to the students: they are to work together in small groups and produce a 5 to 10 minute puppet show in English. I inform them that the puppet shows will be videotaped. Finally, I show them the puppet stage that they will be using.

The next step is to divide the class into groups of 4 or 5 students each. I try to ensure that the groups are balanced in terms of English ability, otherwise the weakest group may become discouraged, particularly when it comes time to writing a script. I also try to ensure a nice mix of male and female students in coed classes.

Each group must now decide on a story for their puppet show. Students can choose from a wide range of story types, including folk tales, children's stories, myths, and songs. For instance, my students have done productions of Momotaro, Jack and the Beanstalk, Urashima Taro, The Three Little Pigs, The Tortoise and the Hare, The Wizard of Oz, and The Very Hungry Caterpillar. As a variation, the students can be asked to look for folk tales from foreign countries, in order to promote cross-cultural awareness. Students can go to the library or bookstore to find books such as Tales of a Korean Grandmother (by Frances Carpenter). Some students have written original stories involving familiar characters such as Mickey Mouse and Doraemon. If your syllabus is thematically based, you could ask your students to write scripts related to specific themes or issues (bullying, smoking and other health issues, sexual harassment, etc.).

It will probably take an entire class session to introduce the activity, divide the students into groups, and have them choose a story. By the end of the class session, each group should at the

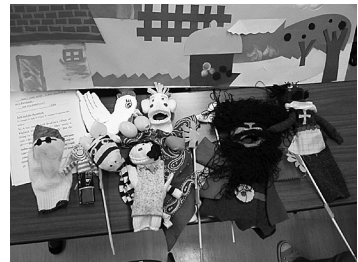
very least have decided on a story on which to base their script. Make sure that each group has a different story to present. If you have extra time remaining in the class session, the students can begin working on their scripts.



Urashima Taro



The Three Little Pigs



Jack and the Beanstalk

Script-Writing

At least one full class session should be devoted to script writing. It might be helpful for the students to see past examples of scripts if you have them (see Appendix).

There are a few key points that the students should keep in mind as they write their scripts. First of all, make sure that the number of different characters in a script is kept to a minimum. If the students are basing their play on a well-known story, certain characters or parts of the story may have to be eliminated. Students should keep track of how many and what type of puppets will be needed in their production as they write the script. Likewise, the script should not call for too many changes in setting. The students should not have to make more than two or three backdrops. If a puppet show production involves too many puppets and backdrops, it will require more time and work than is necessary for the purposes of this class activity; furthermore, it will make the actual performance of the puppet show that much more complicated.

Another key point to keep in mind is that the visual aspect of the puppet show is perhaps as important as the script. As the students write the script, they should visualize what their puppets will be doing as they speak their lines. Long monologues do not usually work too well in puppet shows, especially if nothing else is happening visually as the puppet speaks. Dialogs with rapid-fire exchanges between puppets work best. If narration is needed to make the script work, a human or puppet narrator can be written in, but keep narration to a minimum.

Finally, encourage the students to be creative in writing the script. They should feel free to add jokes, slang expressions, and unexpected departures from a well-known story, perhaps even a different ending.

While the students are working on their scripts, the teacher's role should be to:

- visit each group and to check on the correctness of their English
- make suggestions for words or expressions they might consider using
- find out if the students can pronounce the words in the script properly, and
- encourage humor and creativity.

When the students have completed the first draft of a script, they should be asked to do a reading of the script. This reading should be timed in order to gauge whether the script needs to be shortened or lengthened.

If the students are unable to complete their script in one class session, and this is often the case, they should be encouraged to finish it as homework. I usually require the students to send me their script by e-mail so that I can check it before the next class session. Once the scripts are ready, each group will have a good idea about what sort of puppets, props, and backdrops they need to make.

Making the Puppets

Preparation is important for this phase. You will need to gather several pairs of scissors, white glue, sewing needles, thread, yarn, felt, plastic eyes, oak tag paper, color markers, glitter, cellophane tape, etc. Try to have enough of everything so that students do not have to waste a lot of time waiting for their turn to use something. Many of these things can be bought cheaply at hundred-yen shops. Ask the students to bring some of the things mentioned above, as well as old socks, gloves, paper cups, and anything else that could be used to make a puppet. I have seen one student turn pink dishwashing gloves into pig puppets and another student transform a green instant ramen bowl into a turtle puppet.

There are many types of puppets that can be made, but for the purposes of the student productions, stick puppets and sock puppets are the most practical. If you do not want to spend a lot of time on the making of puppets, then stick puppets might be best for your class. They consist of colorful illustrations of characters that are cut out, pasted on stiff paper or cardboard, and then attached to sticks. The big drawback is that these puppets are limited in terms of expressiveness, although it is possible to manipulate the arms of these puppets using rods (see Figure 2).

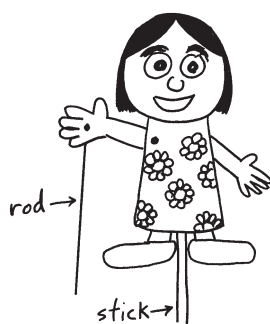


figure 2: a stick puppet with a rod-controlled arm

Sock puppets are preferable because you can create a moveable mouth on the puppet, but they require a little more time to construct and a little bit of sewing with needle and thread. The mouth is created on a sock by turning it inside out and cutting a horizontal slit where you want the mouth to be. Next, open the slit wide open and pin the mouth onto a black or red piece of cloth, depending on what color you want the inside of the mouth to be. Sew the mouth onto the material, cut off any excess material, then turn the sock right-side out. After that, other features can be added, including eyes, hair, clothes, etc. I like to use material from the left-over sock to create arms for the puppet. By attaching a rod to the end of one of these arms, you end up with a puppet that can make gestures (see Figure 3).

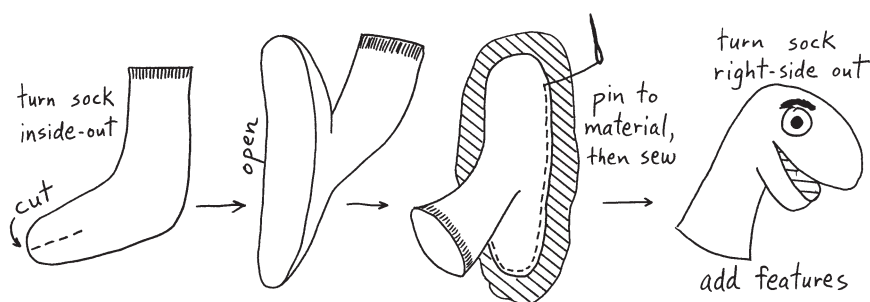
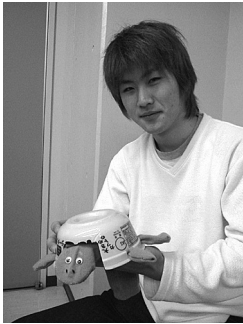


figure 3: How to make a sock puppet. (adapted from material produced by the Technical Assistance Center, Office of Library Services, Department of Education, State of Hawaii.)

I try to encourage the use of English during this puppet-making phase of the project. It is a chance for students to practice useful expressions in English. “May I borrow your scissors?” “Why don’t you add some eyebrows on that puppet?” “Where’s the glue?” “I need some white thread.” It is a nice opportunity for students to experience using the language to accomplish a task. It is communication with a real purpose. You may want to write a few useful sentence patterns on the board.

The students may need to spend another class session finalizing preparations for the puppet

shows: designing backdrops, creating props, and putting final touches on their puppets and scripts. Each group may want to discuss how to make their puppet show more entertaining, for example, by including background music and other special sound and visual effects. For instance, in a recent performance of Urashima Taro in one of my classes, the group blew soap bubbles to create an underwater effect and shifted loose sand from side to side in a flat box to recreate the sound of ocean waves.



Hiroya and a turtle puppet



Hiromi and her zebra



Mayumi and her old man

Rehearsal and Presentation

The amount of time spent on rehearsal depends on how polished you want the performances to be. Here are some key points to keep in mind as the students rehearse their puppet shows:

1. Check whether the students are pronouncing each word correctly. Let students know if they are speaking too quietly or not articulating clearly enough.
2. Inexperienced puppeteers will often hold a puppet in such a way that the audience cannot see the puppet clearly. For example, they may hold the puppet too low relative to the stage so that only part of the head is visible. The puppeteers must keep the audience's perspective in mind as they hold their puppets.
3. The students need not memorize the script, since it is possible to tape the script up on the puppeteers' side of the stage, but they should know the script well enough so that the play runs smoothly.
4. Things can get pretty chaotic behind a puppet stage, so be sure that the students work out in detail where each person will be, as well as where the puppets will be placed, who will change the backdrops, who will take care of the music, and so on.

If you do not want to spend too many class sessions on the puppet productions, then you can

have the students do a quick rehearsal and give the performance on the same day. Keep in mind, however, that each group will need at least a few minutes to set up for their show, so leave plenty of time for the performances. Be sure to videotape the performances, so that you can show future classes what your students have done.

Follow Up and Evaluation

After the puppet shows, I like to praise the students' efforts and to point out things that I especially liked, for example, a funny line in the script, an especially interesting-looking puppet, skillful puppeteering, and so forth.

To evaluate the students, you will want to consider two aspects of the production- the process of preparing for the puppet shows and the final product, which is the puppet show itself. In terms of the process, did the students work well together? Did they produce a good script? Did the students make an effort to speak English during the puppet-making stage of this project? Did they demonstrate enthusiasm, creativity, and good teamwork? Regarding the final product, did the students speak clearly and with adequate volume? Did the audience respond well to the puppet show? I sometimes ask the audience to vote for the puppet show that they felt was the best and I give the highest marks or bonus points to the group with the most votes.

By the way, the puppets can be used for an additional speaking activity. Sometimes I like to have the students form pairs or small groups. I ask the students to have their puppets engage in spontaneous conversation. This is an excellent way for students to practice conversational English without feeling self-conscious, because they are speaking through their puppets. As a variation, a puppet can be "interviewed" by some students or by other puppets.

Finally, I ask the students to give me their puppets if they do not plan to keep them. I save the best ones to show future classes.

Conclusion

Incorporating puppet productions in your English classes will obviously require a lot of preparation, especially the first time you try it, but it is well worth the effort. Puppets can create energy, fun, and motivation in your classroom and can help to reduce negative attitudes and inhibition. Students will enjoy working in groups in an effort to meet a creative challenge. In addition, they will have an opportunity to improve their English by trying to write a script in English, as well as by using English to accomplish certain tasks, such as making the puppets.

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Appendix: A Sample Script

The Mole and the Statue

(written by John Pak, Joanne Ho, and Mildred Nabeta; adapted from a story in Tales of a Korean Grandmother, by Frances Carpenter)

Characters: Father Mole
Bi Bim Bop (his daughter)
Mr. Sun
Mr. Cloud
Mr. Wind
Mr. Statue
Kal Bi (another mole)

(start music, enter Father Mole, stage right)

Father: My, what a beautiful day! Speaking of beautiful, where is my beautiful daughter?
Bi Bim Bop, where are you?

(enter Bi Bim Bop, stage left)

Bi Bim Bop: Here I am, papa!

Father: How is my beautiful daughter today?

Bi Bim Bop: (depressed) Oh, all right, I guess.

Father: Is something bothering you?

Bi Bim Bop: Oh, nothing.

Father: Come on. You can tell me. I'm your father, you know!

Bi Bim Bop: Well, you remember Kook Su. She's getting married next week and she's two years younger than me!! And you know Kim Chee? She's married already!!

Father: There, there. (patting her) Don't worry. Why don't you go in the house and practice your piano.

(Bi Bim Bop exits, stage left)

I guess it's time to find a husband for my daughter. My daughter is so beautiful that she deserves to marry someone special. I want her to marry the most powerful person around!! But who is the most powerful person?

(Mr. Sun rises slowly, stage left)

Mr. Sun: (singing to the tune of "You Are the Sunshine of My Life")

I am the sunshine of my life...

Father: That's it!! The sun is the most powerful person. He shines over all of us everyday. Hey, Mr. Sun! How are you today?

Mr. Sun: (cool voice) I'm tired, man! I had a hot date with Miss Moon last night.

Father: Do you plan to marry her?

Mr. Sun: Nah, we just can't seem to get it together. Anyway, I want a more down-to-earth girl.

Father: My daughter is the most beautiful mole in the whole wide world, and she is very down-to-earth, considering we live underground. Would you like to marry her?

Mr. Sun: Cool it, pop! Quit rushing things. I have all day. Let me see her first.

Father: All right. Bi Bim Bop!! Come here, please.

(enter Bi Bim Bop, stage left)

Bi Bim Bop: Yes, father?

Father: I want you to meet someone.

Bi Bim Bop: (looking around) Where? I don't see anyone.

Father: He's up there. (points to Mr. Sun) Well, Mr. Sun, what do you think of my beautiful daughter?

Mr. Sun: You want me to marry HER? No way!!

(Bi Bim Bop cries and exits, stage left)

Father: You are a MEAN sun!! To think I've looked up to you all my life. I hope the cloud covers you up forever!! Hey, wait a minute!! That means the cloud is even stronger than you are!!

(Mr. Cloud starts to come out, stage right, and starts to cover up the sun)

Mr. Sun: Hey, what's happening?

Father: Mr. Cloud, are you busy now?

Mr. Cloud: (gruff voice) Just hanging around.

Father: Aren't you the most powerful person around here?

Mr. Cloud: Yes, I reign over everybody.

Father: My daughter is the most beautiful mole in the whole wide world. Would you like to marry her?

Mr. Cloud: Hmm... maybe. Let me see her first.

Father: All right. Bi Bim Bop!! Where are you?

(enter Bi Bim Bop, stage left)

Bi Bim Bop: Here, papa. What is it?

Father: I want you to meet someone.

Bi Bim Bop: Oh no! I don't want to see Mr. Sun ever again!

Father: No, no. I have another gentleman here who would like to meet you. Well, Mr. Cloud, what do you think?

(a lightning bolt appears and there is a loud rumbling noise; Bi Bim Bop is frightened and runs away)

You frightened my daughter away!!

Mr. Cloud: Well, then she's not my type if she gets scared of me so easily.

Father: You are a MEAN cloud!! I hope the wind blows you away. Hey, wait a minute!! That means the wind is even stronger than you and Mr. Sun!!

(enter Mr. Wind, stage left, and Mr. Cloud is blown away)

Mr. Wind! Mr. Wind! How are you today?

Mr Wind: Fine, fine. Just passing through.

Father: My daughter is the most beautiful mole in the whole wide world. I would like her to marry the most powerful person. You can blow the clouds around and even bend trees to the ground. Aren't you the most powerful person?

Mr. Wind: Not really. Sure, I can blow the clouds around, but there's one thing I can never blow down.

Father: What's that?

Mr. Wind: The stone statue.

Father: The stone statue? Why the stone statue? It doesn't move!!

Mr. Wind: Exactly!! I am unable to move him. (exits with a whirl)

Father: I must have my daughter meet this stone statue. Bi Bim Bop!!

Bi Bim Bop: Yes, papa?

Father: There is someone I want you to meet.

Bi Bim Bop: Not again!!

Father: WHAT?

Bi Bim Bop: (meekly) Nothing.

(they go "walking" until they approach a stone statue)

Father: There he is! A fine-looking statue. No one can push him around.

Bi Bim Bop: He looks so cold and hard.

Father: Never mind! I'm getting desperate. He'll make a fine husband. Excuse me, Mr. Statue.

Mr. Statue: Yes?

Father: I have heard that you are the most powerful person around here. My daughter deserves to marry the best because she is the most beautiful mole in the whole wide

world. Would you like to marry her?

Mr. Statue: It is true that I am strong. The sun cannot melt me. The cloud with its rain cannot wash me away. The wind cannot move me even one inch. In all the world, there is only one person I fear.

Father: Who is it?

Mr. Statue: A mole.

Father: A mole? We are just small creatures that live deep in the ground.

Mr. Statue: But it is only a mole that can dig the earth from under my feet. If a mole digs there long enough, I will fall over. Oh, no!! It's happening!!

(The statue begins toppling over, and a mole appears from below)

Bi Bim Bop: There, papa! A mole! He must be the most powerful person.

Father: What is your name, young man?

Kal Bi: My name is Kal Bi. I have always loved your daughter from afar. May I marry her?

Father: Yes, you may, but why don't you ask her yourself? (exits, stage right)

Kal Bi: Bi Bim Bop, I think you are SO cute. Will you marry me?

Bi Bim Bop: Ummm.... well.... yes, I'll marry you!!

Kal Bi: All right!!

(They kiss and hug, exit stage left)