

PUPPETS IN THE CLASSROOM

Angela Llanas,
 Instituto Anglo-Mexicano,
 Sucursal Sur, México, D.F.

Why is it a good idea to use puppets in the EFL classroom? Most children like puppets and so they find a class in which the teacher employs puppets enjoyable. It is a well-known fact that what we enjoy we find memorable. Many people believe the use of puppets enables children to learn better and more quickly.

This brings us to the next question. If it is such a good idea to use puppets, why not go to the nearest toy shop and buy several of the fluffy, attractive ones on sale there? Why bother to make one's own for the classroom? There are two possible reasons for not buying commercially produced ones: firstly, they are usually very expensive and secondly, such puppets are usually well-known characters (Walt Disney, Sesame Street, etc.) and will probably not fit into the class you are preparing. In other words, it will be very difficult to persuade a class of children that they are not really looking at Mickey Mouse, whom they all know very well, but at John Bloggs, an entirely different character.

I believe the best classroom puppets are those made by the teacher himself. He need not be artistic or rich and he does not have to have a lot of spare time to spend making puppets. What follows, then, is only meant to give some ideas about how to make and how to use puppets in the classroom.

Puppets can be made from almost any material: stiff white paper (cartulina), wooden sticks, lollipop sticks, coloured crepe paper, pins, tape, glue, crayons or plumones, unicef balls and easily manageable material like felt, and a pair of scissors.

Puppet number I

Draw a head on a piece of white paper; colour it and cut it out.



Turn the puppet face over and glue a lollipop stick on to the reverse side. This is for the teacher or student to hold on to when making the puppet 'speak'. This puppet is more or less guaranteed to take only a minute and a half to make and to cost considerably less than a peso. Try it in your classes. It may be simple but your students will find it enjoyable.



This very easy-to-make puppet could be used in a four-phase drill. For example, the teacher (and later a student) would hold up the puppet, whose name is Ping-Pong.

Teacher: Does Ping-Pong come from the United States?

SS: No, he doesn't.

Teacher: Where does he come from?

SS: He comes from China.

The next step would be (either as homework or as a class activity) for the children to make their own puppets, each with its own national characteristics. Thus subsequent practice of this language would include all the students saying something new.

Puppet number 2

Draw a head on stiff white paper as before, but this time make sure it has a good solid neck! Colour the face and cut it out. Out of the same paper cut out rudimentary hands. So far it should look something like this:

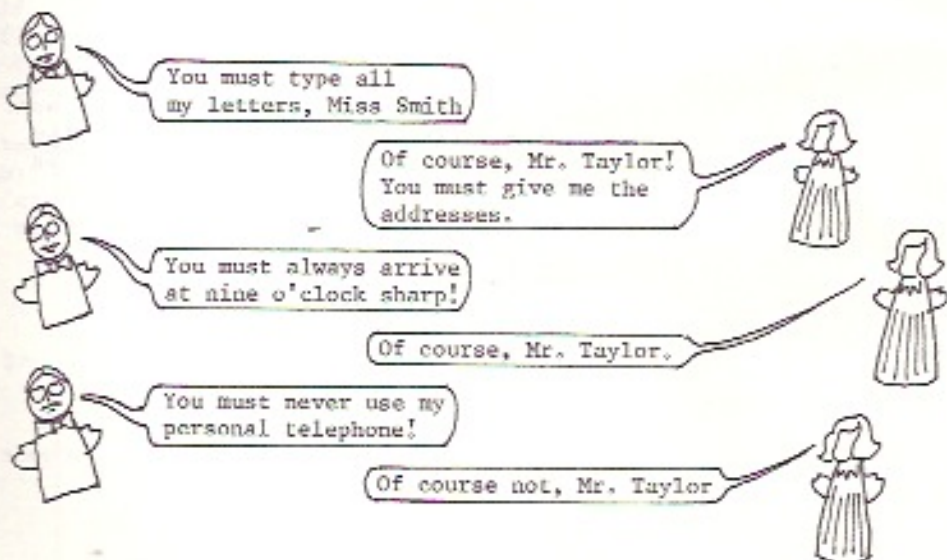


(Remember that it is a good idea to get as much character into your puppets' faces as possible).

The hands may look more like boxing gloves than the beautifully manicured hands of the bilingual secretary you are aiming at, but that doesn't matter. Next, cut out a strip of crepe paper. The strip should be long enough to cover your hand and broad enough to allow your hand to nestle comfortably inside. Form the crepe paper into a tube and gather it round the neck of the paper face you have already prepared. With a stapling machine staple the dress firmly to the neck of the puppet and then staple the hands to the dress. Puppet number 2 should then look something like this:



The teacher's or student's hand fits into the crepe paper skirt and, if you grasp firmly the bit of neck which protrudes down the inside of the dress you will find you can control the puppet quite nicely during a dialogue. This type of puppet could be used for the presentation stage of a lesson. For example, the teacher might have the efficient secretary on one hand and her boss on the other hand. The following dialogue might ensue:



Puppet number 3

There are of course many more ways to make puppets. For example, the unicef ball puppet on to which you paint a face. The nose is simply a smaller unicef ball stuck into place with a pin. The hair is coloured crepe paper strips pinned into place. Stick the whole head on a long stick and around this secure with adhesive tape the crepe paper clothing. Staple the hands as in puppet number 2. The whole puppet should not take more than five minutes to make. Your finished puppet might look like this:



Puppet theatres

The next idea is especially effective for primary schools, although there is no reason why it should not be adapted for secondary school use.

The teacher presents a story to the class. For primary schools this may be a well-known fairy story like Goldilocks and the Three Bears. This will be presented either through blackboard drawings or flashcards and will be told in the third person. It might go something like this:



Mother Bear made breakfast.



She made three bowls of porridge.



Daddy Bear said, "My porridge is too hot!"



Baby Bear said, "My porridge is too hot!"



Mother Bear said "My porridge is too hot! Let's go out."



So the three bears went for a walk in the forest.

The childrens' task is to change this story into a little play. For example:

Baby Bear: What are you doing, Mummy?
 Mother Bear: I'm making breakfast.
 Baby Bear: What are you making for breakfast?
 Mother Bear: I'm making porridge, Baby Bear.
 Father Bear: Where's my porridge, Mother Bear?
 Mother Bear: Here it is, dear. Now let's sit down,
 Father Bear: My porridge is too hot!
 Mother Bear: Oh, dear!
 Baby Bear: My porridge is too hot!
 Mother Bear: Oh, dear! Oh! My porridge is too hot. Let's go for a walk in the forest.

The next step is to make a puppet theatre and puppets for the 'performance' of the childrens' play. The theatre is made out of a cardboard box, available in any shop. Make the following cuts in the box.



The cut at the back is necessary so that the scenery, which is to be painted on white paper, can be lowered into the theatre. It can be secured with white adhesive tape, which has the advantage of being useable more than once without ruining the back of the theatre or losing any of its 'stick'.

Example:



Across the front of the theatre stretch a piece of string to which can be attached a curtain.



The theatre is ready! Now for the puppets.

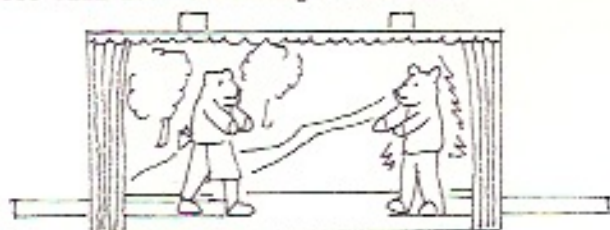
Theatre Puppets

The puppets for this type of classroom puppet theatre are made of very stiff white cardboard with stiff horizontal 'tails' so that the children can manipulate the puppets from the 'wings'. They are best coloured with poster paints or the type of felt pens which have indelible ink. In the case of the three bears, the puppet shapes can be covered in yellow towelling material stuck on with glue. This gives the required furry effect.

The puppets should look something like this:



When the children, who should learn the lines and speak for the puppets, put on their performance for their classmates or a parallel group, the final effect will look something like this:



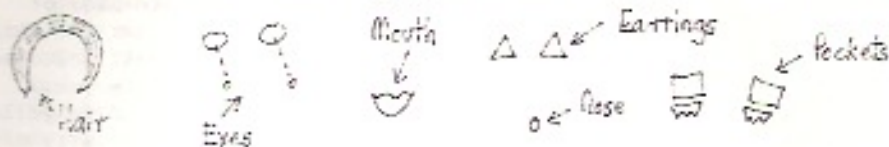
Hand Puppets

The last type of puppet I wish to mention is the felt puppet. It is more expensive than the others, but longer-wearing, and for this reason suitable for handling in the classroom. Felt puppets are also more flexible because they can be made to move their hands, etc.

Each puppet will probably take about twenty minutes to make. From felt material cut out the basic puppet shape twice (front and back):



Then out of different pieces of different coloured felt cut out the details of your puppet, such as eyes, hair, nose, earrings, pockets, etc.



Stitch these details on to the piece of felt to be used for the front of the puppet. Don't worry if you haven't got a machine! Ordinary back-stitch will do just as well!

The front half of your puppet should look like this:



All you have to do now is stitch the back half into position leaving the bottom open and the felt puppet is finished.

This type of puppet is perfect for classroom practice. I would suggest that you use it as a first step to role-playing. In other words, the teacher presents a dialogue with a puppet on each hand; then the students take over. First they can repeat the dialogue from their seats, and then, when they know the words, get several pairs to the front to practice the dialogue, still using the puppets. Then you can move on to role-playing. The students can act out the dialogues themselves, without the puppets.

In conclusion, it is worth remembering to keep the practice well balanced. Change the parts constantly so that each student gets a chance to practice each half of the dialogue.