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WINDOW OF PRACTICE

If you can't say it, take a puppet [1]

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1. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.14.1.6

Using puppets in language learning is unusual in secondary or higher education but has agreat potential to allow students to develop their language skills and creativity. Shy students can learn to engage in open discussions – a requirement for the oral exam – by speaking through the puppet. I wanted to investigate whether young adult learners are willing to engage in such rather unusual but promising method and record their experiences. This article gives an overview of the approach and summarises the student feedback received.

1 Introduction

I love to watch puppet shows. And I am a language teacher. Having used hand puppets and shadow puppets in a supplementary school, teaching German to 8 to 9-year-old children, I could immediately see their interest rising when I introduced the puppets. The children were mesmerised, focused and happy to engage in activities.

But usually I am teaching German to young adults. I have been a German teacher at King's College's Modern Language Centre for 15 years now, and my students are undergrads and postgrads in language courses from A1 to C2 level of the CEFR. I was wondering whether puppets would spark the same interest and engagement in such young adults as it did for the children.

Jane Fisher (2011) states that puppets do not only help children in EYFS to develop their communication skills, but can also be used in maths for problem solving, reasoning and numeracy, or to teach motor skills. But what about the use of puppets in secondary or higher education? The research literature on this topic is sparse.

Wondering why puppets are not used beyond primary education, I decided to try it out with my own King's students. I was in particular keen to find out whether students who are shy or anxious when speaking in class, will be more comfortable and willing to do so with a puppet.

2 The setup

In my beginner classes I used hand and finger puppets for smaller revision sessions. I would encourage them to practise what they have learned so far from

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introducing themselves, to talking about things like their family or food. But this time they are a puppet character in a dialogue with another puppet or two. In intermediate groups I used them for discussions and debates and encouraged students to undertake small research projects in the target language and write from the perspective of their puppet or about their puppet.

Students need time to get into the spirit of the puppet and connect with their character. A first task could be to reflect at home or in class about the puppet, revising not only the vocabulary but also thinking about the personality of their character. Afterwards they would start a dialogue with another puppet.

In the beginning, I let the students use the puppets without any further props, but realised that students tend to 'forget' about their puppet and started speaking with each other like they were in a normal conversation: not using the puppet anymore but looking at eachother, not sure whether to continue talking as the invented character or as themselves. So, I provided a small frame simulating a stage behind which the puppets can appear, talk and interact. This way the puppets stay in the centre of the students' attention and they keep acting without falling back into regular face-to-face conversation.

Figure 1: A picture frame becomes a stage for a conversation between Sigmund Freud and Pablo Picasso. (© Angélique Arts)

The facilities where I work do not allow me to bring a proper stage, but instead I brought in a large scarf or tablecloth to simulate a stage. After a rehearsal period they presented their small dialogues and the observing students were encouraged to address the puppets and ask them questions. This required imagination and a great deal of reflection. The focus was on spontaneity in oral communication, so there was no need to write anything down.

More advanced students were having discussions or debates with their puppets in the same settings. The intermediate B2 students discussed Brexit, international relations, fashion trends and the usage for new media. Prior to these discussions, they revised phrases to express opinions, agreement, doubt or disagreement.

The puppets used represented famous characters like Marie Curie, Sigmund

Figure 2: Providing a "curtain" for the students to hide and become "invisible" to their audience helped some quieter or shy students to perform and speak out. (© Angélique Arts)

Freud, Louis Armstrong etc[2]. Prior to class, students had time to research their chosen puppet character's personality and ask themselves how these historic figures would see the world today. I have seen a Pro-European Mozart, a Brexiteer Sherlock Holmes, and the conqueror Cleopatra arguing together over Brexit to the great amusement of all students.

I had chosen these puppets for my B2 students in order to make the puppet play more intellectually challenging, as I was worried that they might find the usage of animal or traditional puppets too childish. But almost always there were smiles on their faces and a welcoming attitude when presenting the puppets for the first time, regardless whether we used animal hand puppets or the finger puppets of famous people.

3 Improvement of speaking skills

For some students it was a clear advantage that they could hide behind the puppet. They felt more at ease in discussions as it was the puppet making statements and the puppet making mistakes, not the student him/herself. One student remarked that: "Feeling somehow detached from my own self by using the puppet has provided me with more courage to speak in German language." And when watching the mini performances of their fellow students: "The individuals in the classroom break their own respective boundaries."

For me as a teacher the puppets have the advantage that I can address the puppets – not the student directly – when discussing errors or providing feedback on group dynamics.

When my students reflected on their learning experience using puppets, their response was very positive. Not only did they enjoy the activity, but they would have even preferred if the puppets had been used more frequently

[2] These puppets were purchased from The Unemployed Philosopher's Guild: https://philosophersguild.com/collections/magnetic-personalities.

during the year. They regarded the puppet-based activities as more effective than the normal in class speaking activities, as they felt less pressure and more comfortable when speaking in the foreign language. Neuroscience underlines this with their findings that learning takes place in an environment where stress levels are low and learning experiences are relevant to students (Willis 2007).

My students confirmed in a survey that using puppets was "more fun" or "more interesting". This appeared to have an overall positive effect on the students' openness and willingness to learning in general. A student reflects: "Dialogues can be a bit more absurd; but (could) use a wider (range of) vocabulary." The students were not only revising taught vocabulary but also looking for more words because they wanted to express their ideas. Their wish to communicate and express themselves was real and relevant to them. I have experienced that students remembered words with a smile on their face if they had learned these during a puppetry session.

Whilst I was initially wondering whether students would accept puppets as a teaching and learning tool, their answers confirmed this was indeed the case. The puppets provided an opportunity to have serious, intellectually stimulating discussions in a relaxed atmosphere.

Using puppets and makeshift stages can help shy or anxious students, or students that are not used to express opinions, to open up and speak, as it allows these students to hide behind the puppet or behind the stage curtain.

When using puppets for teaching, I recommend giving students sufficient time to get used to the puppet, either by using a session of at least two hours or by bringing the puppets in the week before. The latter will also allow the students to do research and think about the personality of the puppet. You will be amazed by the results.

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