PUPPETS IN THE CLASSROOM

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The first years of a child’s life in school are known to be the most formative. The concepts, associations and attitudes formed at this stage have deep and far reaching effects on a child’s overall growth in later years. That is why, besides giving ‘content knowledge’ to the children in the early years, it is also important to develop a positive attitude towards learning, so that ‘learning’ is not simply a bitter pill to be swallowed because “it is good for the future”, but it should become a quest, and a challenge, and provide learners a will to learn.

How should teachers — specially teachers in developing countries, where resources are limited — go about it? Making the classroom a welcome and interesting place for children is of course the obvious answer. Classrooms can be made interesting and attractive, not only through expensive apparatus and playthings for children, but also by using innovative and inexpensive ways to provide variety and colour in the classrooms. One such means available to teachers is the use of puppets in their learning environments.

Puppets need not be something very elaborate. Actually at the most basic level, they need not be more than masks, which can be made by the teachers and learners themselves, with only white/brown, or coloured paper bags.

Children at the early ages are taken up by something as simply made as these masks. These can be treated as puppets, when teachers put them on their hands to use them for any teaching point that they would like to focus upon. For instance, the paper puppets shown above can be used for showing feelings, such as ‘she’s happy, sad, worried’, or simply for teaching children greetings, or even asking questions from the learners. If the puppet asks a question, it is less threatening than the teacher asking the same question.

Simple and inexpensive

Another way to make a puppet is in the shape of a rag doll made with cloth, or ropes/thread/wool. These too are easy to make, with a little needle work and handiwork required to bring them to life and give pleasure to children. Again, the teacher need not sweat over these herself. They can either be made as part of handiwork done by older children, or cut out shapes could be given to children to get them sewn at home by their parents.
It is not necessary that the faces should be very artistically drawn or the puppets be meticulously crafted. Children are endowed with a very rich imagination and find it easy to play with things which symbolize their concepts. So the rag puppets may be rough and hardy. However, there should be a place to put one hand in at the back of the puppets to hold them upright. This can be usually managed by making the dress loose enough for the hand to go in.

At an early age, specially in a large class, for each child to have her own rag doll may be a lovely experience for a child. It may make the school/classroom a welcome place — and something to look forward to everyday. Also, the rag doll can be used to help children practice sentences they must ‘teach’ their dolls — or have dialogues and do role-plays with their rag dolls. The boredom of repetitive drills is mitigated, as the child involuntarily repeats the sentences again and again to teach the dolls. In fact, once the puppets have been made, they can be used in many ways to make a classroom a more interesting place.

Teachers of young learners know that children love routines and repetitions. Scott and Ytreberg (1990:109) suggest an interesting use of a puppet as a “mascot”. Dressed in the kind of clothes children wear in the classroom (even a uniform!) — the mascot is given a name and is a permanent feature of the classroom. It greets the children in the morning — and it can set the tone for a lesson. He can tell his story. “Yesterday, I went to Dadi’s house. She gave a banana. I played with her cat”. Then the mascot whispers something in the teacher’s ear. She mimes as if she is listening to his request. Then she says “He wants to know what Razia did yesterday!”

Children are by nature social and have an urge to talk about themselves. But responding to a mascot’s request would seem more natural to a child— because in the make-belief world, the mascot is already a person, so communication becomes easier. Besides, as children love routines and repetition, communicating with the mascot is something they are likely to look forward to everyday. This again makes the classroom a more welcoming place to want to come back to. Through the puppets, children can talk of their daily experiences and special events, and become more articulate in expressing their feelings.

Puppets can also be used effectively for story telling. As children’s concepts are still being formed, abstract stories are not as effective as stories told through the puppets — specially if two puppets are the main characters of the story.
Garvie has advocated “storying” as the most powerful medium of instruction specially for young children. It provides a natural bridge between oracy and literacy. It is often said that “What we read, we can tell; what we tell, we can write; and what we can write, we can read.” This creates the necessary integration of oral skills with reading and writing.

Taylor et al (1996:9-19) have given some interesting ideas about how to use puppets in the classroom. First of all, they can be used very well for developing language skills, and are ideal for repetitive drills in phonics, and grammar, because the puppet can act as a correct model for a sound or a correct form. A puppet can also be used to develop questioning skills in the children. He can become a character that children know but they have to ask questions to establish an identity. The puppet can also be used to play the game “Simon says,” or the puppet mimics certain actions which the children verbalize. Thus oral skills in children are developed through the supportive use of puppets in the classroom.

Oral work done with the puppets can be extended to develop reading and writing skills. “Since children’s stories are built on what they know, meaningful hands-on experiences with the puppets will improve their writing. These stories in turn provide materials for (other children) to read. The development of this link between reading and writing stimulates further writing” ....... they lead students from concrete to the abstract.

“In this way puppets stimulate imagination, prediction, reasoning and evaluation which are essential elements of and for reading and writing.”

(Taylor et al 1996:13-14)

There are a number of distinct advantages of using story-telling in the classrooms through puppets.

* It provides a genuine context for language acquisition.

* It gives a “real” audience situation for learners.

* It helps to enlarge vocabulary, ideas, concepts, and imagination.

* It totally learner centred, because the interaction is between the learners and the puppets.

* It develops the children’s power of observation, and sharpens their listening skills.

* It also fosters social skills such as tolerance for others opinions, cooperation and sharing. Because considering puppets to be a part of their world, the child can be taught social skills in a friendly manner.

* It helps to bridge the gap between the abstract and the concrete, and helps children to stay focused. So story-telling acts as a spring board for all other aspects of language learning.

As language teachers, our goal is to teach learners to communicate articulately and clearly as well as read and write effectively. In this process, teachers also need to develop children’s thinking skills such as problem - solving, classifying and interpreting. At the same time, development of social skills in the early stages is crucial because it lays the foundations for future interpersonal relationships. This is a very heavy agenda for teachers of young children — specially in developing countries, where the teachers do not have any other help in their large classes. Puppets in these classrooms can provide teachers with a very pliable aid, who can do their bidding and provide some relief to them. At the same time, puppets can make learning fun for children. Thus the rich medium of puppets can be exploited to a great advantage in a teaching/learning environments.

References:

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Teaching English to Children Longman U.K.

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