

Developing speaking skills in first grade:  
The impact of puppets on young learners' spoken  
interactions and motivation

Final report

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## 1. Practical context

Greenhouse is a non-bilingual private school located in the south of Chile. The English language program of the school was modified in 2013 so as to set new goals co-related to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In addition to the Cambridge English First Certificate for Schools (FCE) taken by 12<sup>th</sup> grade students for more than ten years, the new program incorporated both Cambridge English: Young Learners (YLE) in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and Cambridge English: Preliminary (PET) in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. As a result of the modification of the English language program and the inclusion of two more Cambridge exams, the English language department took the initiative to evaluate the teaching practices, teaching resources, training and tests from pre-school to the upper levels in order to improve teachers' and students' performance. Two teachers from this team participated in this study, Steven Hoit, as the co-observer, and Flor Toledo, as the teacher researcher.

In this action research project we will see 22 eager students of 1<sup>st</sup> grade who are learning to read and write in Spanish, their first language. They have English lessons 4 days a week (each period of 80 minutes).

I, the teacher researcher, have taught English as a foreign language to first graders for 6 years. I have observed that a few children feel comfortable when speaking in front of others. For this reason I was prompted find a way to help my little students enjoy the process of developing their spoken interaction skills.

## 2. Overall aims of research

The research goal takes into account the incorporation of CEFR standards in the curriculum, the requirements of the YLE speaking test and my personal desire to enhance young learners' spoken interaction skills.

At this point, I would like to be honest and say that at first I thought of using role-play as 'the strategy' to help the students to develop these skills. After implementing the use of puppets and observing their enthusiasm, especially when all of them volunteered to participate and asked me if they could bring their own puppets to our next class, I realized how important it was to change my focus, not on role-playing but on puppets. At that moment I thought: 'Wow! This is the opportunity to use a resource they seem to be passionate about in order to make them interact with each other.'

This is why this action research project addresses one broad question: What is the impact of puppets on the development of young learners' spoken interactions and motivation?

## 3. Background reading

### 3.1 Teaching Young Learners

According to McKay (2006), young learners of English are children between 5 and 12 years old who are learning a foreign or second language. The author mentions a number of factors closely related to the outcomes expected when teaching young learners: starting age, amount of contact time, appropriateness of the curriculum, language proficiency and teaching skills of the teacher, and opportunities for them to use the language. She also points out that listening and speaking are the skills commonly addressed by young learner school programs.

When teaching young learners it is essential to understand their cognitive, social and physical characteristics, which are developing constantly. They are also moving from self-awareness to social awareness (McKay, 2006). Children between 5 and 7 learn from direct experience, and get easily distracted due to their short attention span, which lasts from 10 to 15 minutes only. Their physical growth is characterized by children's gross and fine-motor skills development. Thus, McKay (2006) clearly states that children need to be given the chance to show what they are capable of.

Cameron (2001) discusses some of the benefits of learning a foreign language in the primary years. Based on her analysis of children learning English in immersion teaching and as a subject lesson, she concludes that listening comprehension and pronunciation are the areas that students develop the most. On the other hand, grammatical knowledge, which depends on their cognitive development, grows more slowly. One of the most

important characteristics of young learners is that they have the ability to become ‘competent speakers of a new language with remarkable facility, provided they get enough exposure to it’ (Harmer, 2007, p. 15).

### 3.2 Communicative Approach

The Communicative Approach, also known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), has been known for its ‘emphasis’ on how to teach certain re-examined aspects of language (Harmer, 2001, p. 84). The focus of CLT is on teaching language functions by providing students with plenty of opportunities to use the language in different contexts rather than just vocabulary and grammar. The aim of CLT is to achieve communicative competence rather than aiming solely for linguistic accuracy (Harmer, 2001).

Language activities which involve reception, production, interaction or mediation allow the development of the learner’s language communicative competence. So, interactions take place when two individuals participate in an exchange in which production and reception alternate: ‘Even where turn-taking is strictly respected, the listener is generally already forecasting the remainder of the speaker’s message and preparing a response’ (CEFR, 2007, p. 14). Mediation, in both the receptive and productive modes, permits communication when two persons are unable to communicate. According to the CEFR, learners speak the language when they are able to produce spoken language and participate in spoken interactions.

### 3.3 Spoken Interaction

For young learners, spoken language is not only considered a skill as in adult language teaching. Spoken interactions for young learners become the ‘medium through which language is encountered, understood, practised and learnt’ (Cameron, 2001, p.18). Cameron proposes to divide oral language learning on words and interactions, and to replace the idea of ‘doing speaking’ by thinking of ‘how they learn to interact in the foreign language’.

There are two major types of discourse that can be developed in first and foreign language, which vary basically in length of turns and degree of interactions – conversational interaction and extended talk (Brown & Yule, 1983, in Cameron, 2001). Snow (1996) points out that not only exposure, but also children’s participation in these two types of discourse will promote conversational interaction and extended talk development. Furthermore, different children will develop both of them at different rates (Snow, 1996, in Cameron, 2001). The age factor is also relevant when asking a child to take responsibility for how others will understand him or her; moreover, this aspect of discourse develops with age due to children’s understanding of people’s talk which is related to children’s social and cognitive resources.

In order to avoid problems during the production of language and maximise oral production activities, teachers need to be cautious about the support students need. First, teachers should match the task with students’ language level. Then, students need to be aware of the purpose of the task, whilst teachers build students’ confidence and provide restricted tasks practice before prompting them to be spontaneous. Finally, teachers need to assess and identify all the problems cause by the language students’ lack of vocabulary (Harmer, 2001).

### 3.4 Puppets

Puppets are considered an effective resource to use with young learners because they integrate all the major disciplines related to child development such as perceptions, comprehension, movements, coordination and integration with the environment, speech and narration (Korosec, 2013). Children feel more relaxed and motivated when puppets are being used in lessons because the ‘affective filter’, which blocks learning according to Krashen, might be reduced (Brezigar, 2010). Using puppets stimulates learning, builds self-confidence and provide the opportunity to learn communicative skills at an early age (Brezigar, 2010).

### 3.5 Student Motivation

Young children want to understand the world and use their natural curiosity to learn. They have the capacity to get involved in very demanding tasks with a lot of enthusiasm (Cameron, 2001). Harmer (2001) states that sparking and maintaining children’s motivation is one of the main challenges teachers face in the classroom. Teachers need to involve students in a task, determine an adequate level of challenge, provoke participation, pay attention to how they feel, and sustain their motivation. But what is the relationship between motivation and oral production skills? Cameron points out that children’s desire to connect emotionally and communicate with others enhances speaking. For this reason, teachers need to assume the responsibility to connect and adjust topics and tasks to meet children’s interests. The only way for children to talk meaningfully in the classroom is

when there is something they really want to say. The author also suggests that providing an ‘element of choice for pupils’ will increase their motivation (Cameron, 2001, p. 58).

Speaking is a key skill in primary school foreign language curricula due to the children natural ability to learn from natural experiences, develop their social-awareness, and become competent speakers of a foreign language. Puppets allow teachers to create contexts where children can use their curiosity and imagination to take part in oral production activities, which will build on their confidence and teach them to interact with others at an early age.

## 4. Methodology

This case study involved one teacher as an action researcher and another as co-observer. The study was conducted with a class of 22 children aged 6. In order to address the research question the study adopted a qualitative approach. Data was collected by means of four different instruments: field notes, classroom observations, transcripts of students’ interactions and a students’ focus group.

The 1<sup>st</sup> part of the project took place from April to June 2015, which also corresponds to the first school term. During this period, I took field notes regularly. Classroom observations, which took place every two weeks, were always followed by a discussion between the researchers on possible improvements and activities. At the end of the term, I recorded my students and wrote out the transcripts.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the project took place from October to December 2015. I continued applying the three instruments already used in the first part of the project and concluded the study with a focus group, which was lead by the co-observer, a familiar adult, in order to secure a ‘psychologically safe environment’ for the children (McKay, 2006, p. 10).

## 5. Findings and discussion

### 5.1 Field Notes

Throughout the project I kept field notes while observing the learning process to ‘capture the action in the classroom’ (Fichtman & Yendol-Silva, 2003). Field notes include observations made of the classroom activity or noting down what children are doing in particular time intervals.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Part of the Project

I introduced a role-play activity by modelling a conversation with one of the students. At the end of what was called ‘conversation time’ one of them asked if they could bring their own puppets or teddies to the next class. Puppets became very popular, as I had indicated in my field notes during the 4<sup>th</sup> week of May: *“I saw 8 students with their own puppets, and teddies on their desk saying a few words in English. When I said ‘Good morning children’ they answered using their puppets”*.



I noticed children’s engagement with the activity, but I was not sure if they were really paying attention to the puppets’ talks. However, the following anecdote showed that students were not only paying attention, but also had begun to understand puppet speech. *“I said ‘Hello, I am Spiderman’. Most of the boys shouted and said in Spanish ‘No Miss, his real name is Peter Parker’ (4<sup>th</sup> week of May)”*. That day, I decided that ‘conversation time’ would become ‘puppet time’.

During ‘Puppet time’ students followed simple instructions such as ‘1, 2, 3, change’, which meant they needed a new partner and ‘1, 2, 3, action’, which meant they had to start speaking. However, sometimes their enthusiasm led to shouting and misbehaviour. So in order to manage the situation, I made a variation as I wrote in my notes: *“I decided to select half of the students to walk around and talk to the ones who were seated, and then changed groups (1<sup>st</sup> week of June).”* In order to sustain their enthusiasm and keep them on track, ‘Puppet time’ lasted between 15 and 20 minutes.



During the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of June, the co-observer and I noticed that students used language freely, but a few of them looked very anxious and frustrated when their interlocutors did not understand them. My colleague suggested teaching them phrases to indicate lack of understanding and model an interaction together. *“We selected two new big puppets to say ‘Pardon?’ and ‘Can you repeat, please?’ As soon as the children saw the puppets they raised their hands to ask for their name. They attentively observed the toys’ talk. I wrote the phrases on the board, and invited the children to practice them using the new puppet (2<sup>nd</sup> Week of June).”* I wrote the same phrases on the board the next three lessons until I knew the students could use them correctly.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Part of the Project

During the last week of October I noticed that students were losing enthusiasm: *“After the songs ended a group of students said that they wanted to keep on singing instead of playing with puppets.”* For that reason I did not open my bag with puppets during the class and I was glad to see that the project had still an impact on students when the class was over. *“While I was organizing my books (and break had started), three girls came to my desk and took a few puppets from the bag. They played saying words to each other in English”.*

On the third week of November I told the children that I had a surprise for them related to puppets to which a student replied *‘but we have played with all of them already’*, so I explained that I had new puppets (and most of them smiled when hearing that). The next lesson, students seem excited about the new set of puppets (animals) and the wooden stage, so they immediately said *‘Can we use them now?’* I was surprised when two students were speaking in front of others, while moving puppets across the stage using mime and sounds. Clearly, students’ enthusiasm increases when using new puppets. *“Next day, I showed them a new set of puppets, the superheroes, and they happily clapped.”*



The positive impact of puppets on the students’ motivation was also seen when I asked them to draw the activity they liked the most during English language classes. Despite the fact that discouragement was also present in this journey, 12 children out of 18 drew puppets the last class of the school year.



## 5.2 Classroom Observation

The observation by a second researcher was key in this project in order to collect relevant data to be analyzed. Non-participant observations collected over time served as data to allow reflections to take place and make relevant conclusions. Four lessons were observed during the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the project and the 2<sup>nd</sup> part. What follows are extracts from the observer's notes.<sup>1</sup>

### 1<sup>st</sup> Part of the Project

(2<sup>nd</sup> week of June) At the beginning of each class, the teacher used songs, games and pictures in the classroom to catch the students' attention. Then, the students were asked to take out their puppets and use them to interact with their classmates. During these activities students were observed to have adapted well in their process of learning. They have not only embraced the language with great enthusiasm but they have also learnt to use the language in the right context. The introduction of the features of spoken interaction such as 'pardon?' and 'can you repeat, please?' contributed to their adaptive process of behavior, as they are able to internalize and accommodate these features in their social interaction with classmates and teacher.

*'This is after the teacher has practiced with the whole class. Students can now do it on their own taking the previous activity as a language modal. They clearly show good understanding and are focusing on meaning and use of language with an everyday context. Students run and move around happily using the language to interact with their peers.'* (Observation June 16)

The use of songs and games complemented the 'puppet time' activity in ensuring that the atmosphere is favorable for learning the target language. Puppets, on the other hand, provided the students with a concrete situation in which they are able to apply what was learnt and therefore discover language use and context, and at the same time enjoy the cultural experience in which they are able to find inspiration.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Part of the Project

(4<sup>th</sup> week of October) When students were told that it was 'puppet time', almost all of them became very enthusiastic. Many students (about 9) volunteered to come up to the front to practise previous contents: greetings, name of puppet, favorite toy, etc. Six students were selected to use puppets, which they did by moving from classmate to classmate taking turns to practice the language similar to the interaction demonstrated previously. This was done a few times. Despite the fact that some students mentioned some words in Spanish, there was willingness to use the language as much as they could. They showed smiles on their faces and eagerly moved from one classmate to another asking and answering questions in English.

Puppets tend to lower students' anxiety level and increase their motivation level. In using puppets, it was observed that the students were not at all stressed. On the contrary, they were cheerful and were very keen on having a puppet.

*'The task adjusted by the teacher and the topics clearly indicate that they are closely related to the students' interests as they willingly participate and at the same time learn from each other. The use of their own puppets*

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<sup>1</sup> These extracts are paraphrased from the observer's notes, except *italicised* text, which represents a direct quotation from the notes.

and the option they have to interact with their peers show that they are comfortable with activity and this has increased their motivation. There is no expression of anxiety or frustration on their faces.' (Observation October 6<sup>th</sup>)

As the result of their access to puppets and puppet time, students' attention was drawn away from the target language in a very positive way. In doing so, students were able to learn and use phrases, words and even sentences without feeling at all stressed or pressured. Puppet time also created an environment in which student were able to immerse in the language to a certain extent. That is to say that almost all students made an effort to listen and speak to their teacher in English, thus maximizing the use of language.

### Co-observer Overall Comment

It is clearly observed that puppets do have an impact on young learners' motivation with regard to English language learning. The plentitude of benefits that puppets provide the students with make a huge difference as to how much they are able to progress in their English language development. It is for that reason that observations were made so as to provide evidence of such progress. *'The teacher's tone of voice is one that generates confidence therefore students are motivated and show great interest when participating in the activity. Since the language makes sense to the children, they are more than motivated to use the language. This can be seen during the 'puppet time' activity when they are able interact in pairs using cards with pictures of toys and they use simple dialogues such as: 'Do you want my teddy? , Pardon? / Do you want my teddy? Yes, please. Here is my teddy.'* The activities involve the students actively and they enjoy interacting with each other using meaning language and knowing the functions of certain phrases such as *pardon, can you repeat, please?* (Observation October 6<sup>th</sup>). In these lessons it is observed that in order to provide young learners with "puppet time activity" other factors such as classroom environment, classroom management, English language classroom routine and teacher's role must be considered essential and cannot be overlooked. All these factors contribute to making the activity meaningful to young learners. As a result young learners are able to succeed without any negative feeling that might inhibit their English language learning development. The areas of behaviour, cognition and emotions are addressed, bringing about transformation in students.

### 5.3 Transcripts

The focus of this work is to identify whether puppets impact on children's spoken interactions so voice recording was used and transcribed to analyse their discourse. According to the level of the students four oral skills were analysed based on the 'assessment focus for children's language learning' presented by Cameron (2001, p. 230). These skills are: understanding of words, recall of words and chunks, response or initiation in conversational exchange and understanding of sentence-level discourse (asking for clarification). This model is aligned with the CEFR, which differentiates speaking from spoken interactions, and oriented to the development of skills required in YLE exams.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Part of the Project

The interaction that was recorded took place on June 30<sup>th</sup> when children were working on a poster on toys. They were invited to practice at the teacher's desk in pairs, 8 couples volunteered. Three students required the teacher's help to continue their conversation. Most of the 8 couples showed good use of the Cameron's model as observed in couple 1. In the example below, we clearly see that students initiated conversation properly, they ask for clarification, and they recall chunks when saying 'My name is...' or 'Do you want...?' to ask questions. Moreover, they show understanding of words when student 2 offers a 'teddy' and student 1 says 'thank you'.

#### Couple 1 (46 sec. – 30<sup>th</sup> June)

Student 1: Hello  
Student 2: Hello  
Student 1: What's your name?  
Student 2: My name is Northon, and you?  
Student 1: My name is Pink Rabbit. How are you?  
Student 2: I'm wonderful, and you?  
Student 1: I am (5 sec.) I am wonderful.  
Student 2: Do you. And do you want I a teddy?  
Student 1: Pardon?  
Student 2: Do you want I a teddy?  
Student 1: oh yes please. (Mimics as if she received a teddy) Thank you!  
Student 2: Bye-bye  
Student 1: Bye- bye



## 2<sup>nd</sup> Part of the Project

This activity took place on December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Fourteen students participated. They chose a puppet and planned a conversation in 15 minutes. They volunteered to present their performance. In the example below it is possible to see how this couple planned a conversation that included names, colours, animals and actions. Students moved the puppets around the stage and mimicked different actions; for this reason it can be said that the children were able to understand what they were saying.

### Couple 1 (1.09 sec. – 3<sup>rd</sup> December)

Student 1: Hello!  
Student 2: Hello!  
Student 1: What's your name?  
Student 2: My name is Cat. What's your name?  
Student 1: My name is Dog.  
Student 2: What's your favourite colour?  
Student 1: ah blue, and you?  
Student 2: My favourite colour is purple.  
Student 1: Do you want a pizza?  
Student 2: Yes, please. Let's play! (Students move their puppets around the stage as if they were running and eating).  
Student 1: Do you want a hot-dog?  
Student 2: Yes!  
Student 1: Let's play! (Student move their puppets as if they were eating)  
Student 1: I can't climb a tree. Ahhh! (The student moves the puppets of the dog as if it tried to climb a tree.)  
and you?  
Student 2: Yes, I can. (The student moves the puppet of the cat as if it were climbing a tree very fast.)  
Student 1: I can fly?  
Student 2: No, I can't. (The student moves the puppet as if it were trying to fly.)  
And you?  
Student 1: No. ahahah! (The student moves the puppet as if it were trying to fly and then fell down.)  
Student 2: Ok. Bye bye.  
Student 1: Bye bye.

## Overall Comment

In the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the project, there were eight pairs of students and the average length of their conversation was 47 seconds; then at the end of the project there were seven pairs and their average was 1 minute and 11 seconds. Unfortunately, I had a problem with the recording of one couple in the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the project. For this reason, we see 1 couple missing at the end; however, they were students with a high level of achievement.

During the first interactions students seemed to repeat phrases without showing understanding of what they were saying. At the end of the project we can see the children adding mimics and sounds to their interactions showing understanding of what they were saying. Upon using puppets, language learning became a game that facilitated interaction and increased their motivation despite the fact that for some children, understanding someone else's state of mind was a challenge. Cameron (2001) states that discourse in young learners' classrooms cannot demand from children more than what they are capable of doing especially when understanding others, but in this case puppets prompted young learners to talk and understand what their classmates said.

## 5.4 Focus group

The focus group took place on 4<sup>th</sup> December with two groups of five students. The students were selected by the teacher by means of asking for volunteers to talk with the co-observer in the library. Ten students volunteered. This conversation was recorded and carried out in Spanish, students' mother tongue. They answered four questions as shown below.

When answering the first question, *What activities do you like the most of Miss Toledo's class?*, four students mentioned 'playing memory games', three 'puppet time', two indicated that 'dancing' was their favourite, and one said 'singing'.

The second question was: *How do you feel when you use puppets?* The children use the following expressions: 'perfect', 'happy', 'having fun', 'thrilled', 'glad', 'well', 'like a movie director', and 'like being playing'.

The third question was: *Are puppets useful to learn English?* All of the students said that puppets are useful to learn English. However, one student seemed to be insecure and he explained that sometimes he had fun just playing instead of speaking in English.

The last question was: *What puppets do you like the most?* The students gave the following answers: 'animals', 'superheroes', 'dinosaurs', 'ironman', 'cat', 'flash', 'cats and dogs', 'cats and Spiderman'. All of the students referred to the last group of puppets used to learn English, maybe because they were easier to remember or just because they prefer working with 'new puppets' rather than 'old ones'.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusions

Related to the impact of puppets on young learners' spoken interactions and motivation the following conclusions were reached:

- Exposing children to the use of puppets promotes the development of spoken interaction skills. When children focus their attention on puppets, they are unaware of the fact that they are actually practising a foreign language.
- 'Puppet time' is an activity that in this study becomes a game and generates positive feelings; for this reason, learning is less stressful, it flows smoothly, and students are always willing to participate even when speaking in front of others.
- During this project, the length of the interactions increased from 47 seconds to more than a minute at the end. As it is observed on the recordings, at the end of the project children included gestures and sounds that revealed their comprehension of what they were saying. It is clear that by using puppets children had the chance to get involved in meaningful interactions.
- The 'new puppet' factor is key to keep children engaged and motivated. Children curiosity increases by using different puppets along a school term.
- In this research, students seem to benefit from regular practice when developing their spoken interactions skills at least once a week for periods not longer than 20 minutes.
- The use of puppets needs to be guided and modelled by a teacher who also has to identify the right moment for the children to work in pairs, groups, or individually.
- Recording students' interactions during a period of time helps teachers to analyse and make decisions in order to help children to develop new skills, support their weak areas and identify students' progress.

### 6.2 Recommendations for teachers

Findings indicate that using puppets does impact young learners' spoken interactions and motivation positively. However, there are at least four considerations teachers need to take into account based on this study. Firstly, the classroom atmosphere has to guarantee the participation of all the students within an environment of trust, which is essential when working with puppets. Moreover, teachers should not only be able to create a positive 'emotional atmosphere', but to sustain it throughout the lesson. For this reason, observing students while following a class routine will help teachers to test students' willingness and attitudes, to both control misbehaviour before it gets out of hand and increase their interest in the lesson (Harmer, 2001).

Secondly, the use of puppets as a learning activity needs to incorporate a little variation when teachers decide to practise it regularly. Changes can include the integration of new resources such as finger puppets, hats, teddies, use of a stage or a variation in the distribution of space. As seen in the field notes and classroom observations,

'puppet time' can take place when a couple of students interact in front of the class, when many couples interact simultaneously sitting on the floor or walking around the classroom, or when a group of students work with puppets while others carry out a different task.

Thirdly, teachers need to monitor students' interactions in order to identify the different problems that might arise. Findings showed that both recordings and peer observation are useful tools not only to keep records of students' progress, but also to detect problematic situations and to provide solutions.

Lastly, teachers should clearly identify the aspect of language they want the students to develop and select a suitable assessment model (Cameron, 2001). Undoubtedly, one of the advantages of using puppets is to provide young learners with the opportunity to use language out of the textbook context, while participating in real spoken interactions and facilitating the acquisition of English.

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