

# **How Puppetry Helps the Oral Language Development of Language Minority Kindergartners**

**Allyson N. Lepley  
Glen Forest Elementary  
Fairfax County Public Schools  
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## **Introduction**

Research shows that language minority students respond favorably to the use of creative dramatics in helping them develop oral language skills. Creative dramatics, such as the use of puppets, provides a medium in which students become more comfortable expressing themselves or re-telling a story. This research study examines how the use of puppets in a kindergarten classroom helps language minority students develop oral language. The class used in this study consisted of twenty-two kindergartners from ten different ethnic backgrounds. This classroom study examined how students responded to puppets as they were explored and when lessons were facilitated using puppets. Language minority students are often hesitant to participate in oral classroom activities due to their limited understanding of the English language. With this project, the teacher hoped to use the puppets to help students come out of their fears of speaking by communicating through the use of puppets.

## **The Question**

The objective of this study was to see if the use of puppets helped language minority students develop oral language and help them become comfortable speaking in front of their peers.

## **Research**

As stated on the Frisch Marionette Company's website, "Through puppetry children can learn new ways to express themselves while learning new skills, leading the child on a path of self-discovery and expression that help instill confidence and boost self-esteem."<sup>1</sup>

Research has shown that there are many benefits to using puppetry in the classroom, all of which would benefit language minority students. Puppetry, or dramatics, can help students internalize language patterns, enhance listening skills, develop risk-taking skills and student confidence, and provide opportunities for students to work cooperatively as a group. It has also been observed that dramatics allows students to develop a greater understanding of themselves and their world.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.frischmarionettes.com/parents+teachers.html>

Puppetry is a medium for students to use to express themselves and begin to explore the various components of the English language. The use of creative dramatics sets up a face-to-face encounter for students that they usually do not experience in the classroom setting. By working together using the puppets, students develop conversation skills such as risk taking and appropriate responses in a conversation.

Research also shows that dramatics provide an opportunity for students to develop a sense of story. In acting out familiar stories students are becoming acquainted with common children's culture in the English language. The stories follow a pattern of rhythm and rhyme and have a plot structure that students begin to understand as they actively participate in a story.

Puppetry also helps students begin to develop risk-taking skills that will help them develop self-confidence. The use of puppets provides an opportunity for students to become comfortable exploring language and becoming expressive verbally. Research shows that students become less inhibited when they are hidden behind the puppets. Once students become more comfortable and less self-conscious, they are more available to begin exploring the conventions of the English language.

Another benefit of puppetry and dramatization is that students will develop cooperative learning skills by working together. For a puppet show to provide the benefits of developing communications skills, students are required to work together.

Puppetry also provides students with a varied learning environment that provides a chance for them to express themselves. In the fun atmosphere that puppetry brings to the classroom, students become relaxed and eager to explore what language and stories have to offer. As stated in Ernst-Slavit and Wenger's research, dramatics provides the face-to-face interaction that maximizes language learning and creates a classroom environment that allows all students, regardless of language ability, to actively participate in the performance.

## Students

The students used in this study were kindergarten students in the researchers' class at Glen Forest Elementary. The class is composed of twenty-two students from ten different countries. The students came from Bolivia, El Salvador, India, Iran, Jerusalem, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Peru, Russia, and Vietnam. Nineteen of the twenty-two students were second language learners, but students' level of language acquisition varied.

## Program

The teacher started her study by keeping a tally of what activities her students were choosing to do in their free time. From this, the teacher got an understanding of what types of activities her students preferred, and who was choosing activities that required communicating with other students. The teacher also kept a tally of which students volunteered and participated in classroom

discussions. From this, the teacher noticed that, initially, the native English speakers and language minority students who had greater oral language skills were the students who were participating. Would the use of puppets affect who and to what degree students participated? Would the puppets help those students who were not participating as much get over their inhibitions of exploring the use of the English language? The methodology of this project was based on the teacher's observations of how students reacted to working with the puppets.

The puppets were first introduced to the class during center time and students were allowed to explore with the puppets as they wished. Students were very eager to get a chance to explore and immediately began creating dialogue between one another. The teacher recorded which students were choosing to work with the puppets and which students were not. Students' dialogue was monitored and students were often heard re-telling and acting out parts of familiar stories.

The puppets were also incorporated into the instruction of thematic units. After the class trip to the zoo, students were allowed time to "act out" what they had experienced. Students were observed and the teacher noticed that students were interacting with each other by providing dialogue for the "children" who were visiting the zoo in their puppet play, as well as acting out how the animals would be behaving.

Students also used the puppets as they learned about occupations. After classroom lessons talking about the jobs of various community helpers, students were given time to act out these jobs using community helper puppets. It was observed that students were taking the knowledge they had of various careers and were incorporating this into their exploratory play at the puppet center.

The acting out of familiar stories was also incorporated into this research project. Puppets from classic stories such as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, and *The Three Little Pigs* were placed in the puppet center and children's responses were observed. These puppets corresponded to lessons taught earlier in the school year and the teacher observed to see if children recreated the stories using the puppets.

The teacher completed the puppet research by putting on a small puppet show for the class's third grade buddies. Observations were made of which students were involved and what role different children took in the puppet show.

## Results

From the study in the teacher's classroom, puppets seem to have a positive impact on students' participation. Through the teacher's observations it was seen that students became very excited when they were able to use the puppets to learn. Over the course of the study, there was an increased participation from students who were less proficient. The teacher observed students using their prior knowledge of stories in their dialogues. One student

who tended to be shy, was overheard at the puppet theater stating, "Once upon a time, there was a..."

Another interesting situation that arose during observation occurred when two girls, Mary and Corin, both of whom spoke Spanish at home were creating dialogue between two puppets. Corin is a student who has a strong understanding of oral language, while Mary rarely spoke in English. Mary began having her puppet talk to the other puppet in Spanish. Corin responded in Spanish before the teacher intervened to try to redirect the pair to use English for their dialogue. The teacher began asking Mary questions about the puppet in English. "What is the puppet's favorite food? What is her favorite color?" When asked these questions about the puppet, Mary responded to the questions in English.

When the class began practicing for their puppet show, the teacher was surprised at the number of students (who usually did not volunteer to participate in discussions) who wanted to have a part in the plays of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and *The Three Pigs*. The entire class took part in the preparation of the play by helping decide what direction our stories would take and what the different puppets would say and do in the play. The teacher then selected the puppeteers, trying to give less proficient students a role in the show. The final show was successful in showing the effect the use of puppets has on student confidence.

## Conclusion

Through classroom observations, this research project shows that there is a true value to using puppets and other forms of dramatics to help develop the language skills of language minority learners. This project shows that students become more comfortable expressing themselves when using a medium to help share their ideas. Students in this research study worked together to explore stories and new information which helped develop the collaborative atmosphere of the teacher's classroom. The use of puppetry in this multicultural classroom has shown that dramatics should be incorporated into the learning experiences of language minority students.

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