

Benefits of Puppet Use

The Benefits of Puppet Use as a Strategy for Teaching Vocabulary at the Secondary School Level with  
Students Who Have Mixed Learning Disabilities

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### Abstract

This study focused on the benefits of play and the use of puppets at the preschool and elementary school levels. There is a limited body of supportive research that demonstrates positive educational benefits with the use of puppets in lessons even though very little, if any, in-depth research has been conducted on the benefits of using puppets with students at the secondary or college levels. Based on the results of this study, it can be strongly argued that there is a place for play and the use of puppets as creative drama to learn vocabulary at the secondary school level.

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## Introduction

### Background

There has been research conducted on the many and varied benefits of using puppets to enhance lessons with preschool and elementary age school children. There has also been research done in the medical field that supports the use of puppets with children in medical treatment and therapy. This research supports the use of the narrative pedagogy as students learn as they are speaking or story telling.

While there has been evidence linking increased comprehension among many benefits for using puppets in the classroom, little or no research has been conducted to support the use of puppets in content classes at the secondary or college level with students.

### B. Purpose

This study hopes to provide evidence that many of the Andrew benefits for using puppets with younger students can also be exhibited by older students and young adults, as well. This research can help to provide new teaching strategies for educators to use in the classroom with learning disabled students at the secondary level.

### C. Problem Statement

The problem statement explored in this study is, can the use of puppets benefit and enhance vocabulary lessons being taught at the secondary level to students who have learning disabilities?

### D. Research Questions

The specific research questions are:

How will students respond to the use of the puppets?

Did students enjoy using the puppets?

What advantages or disadvantages were noted with use of the puppets?

Are puppets appropriate to use at the secondary level?

Do puppets help students develop an understanding of vocabulary words?

Will teachers and students use the puppets in future lessons?

## II. Review of the Literature

The benefits of the use of puppets in the classroom are many and varied. The use of puppets provides an opportunity for student expression through the social aspects of communication. Students who are working in a group to prepare and present a puppet play are learning to work cooperatively with others, where there is give and take and sharing of ideas. This offers the students the advantage of establishing group cohesion (Bennett, 2002). The experience affords the student a sense of belonging to a group.

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The group work of puppetry has not only been shown to improve student social skills, but will allow the individual to attain success. “Individual students may be willing to work harder if there is a group goal. Through such performances (puppet plays), students can explore stories in cooperation with their peers and also improve their individual proficiencies,” states Ruth Bennett (2002). One study indicates that student choice is very important not only for developing common, group views, but also in creating and forming individual views (Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994). Another study of language and literacy development found that it was of benefit to share group reading experiences and use “playful activities in which children act out stories” using reading and writing (McGee & Richgels, 1996).

A puppet play that is written and performed by children incorporates spontaneity into group reading (Bennett, 2002). Students can personalize the vocabulary into their own language. Vivian Parley (1990) states that “in storytelling, as in play, the social interactions we call interruptions usually improve the narrative.” The student can claim ownership of the project and encode vocabulary into their language. While developing and writing the puppet play students are given the opportunity to develop language which enhances both vocabulary and comprehension. Students activate prior knowledge to create new puppet scripts and projects.

For many students the group work of the puppet presentations can be less intimidating than an individual performance. The use of a puppet can provide help with public speaking, especially for the shy or apprehensive student. The use of puppets is beneficial to the student who prefers to learn kinesthetically. Puppet activities keep students actively engaged with hands-on activities.

The use of puppets can motivate student interest in the reading selection or topic. “Students (who are) typically resistant to lecturing and representing diverse learning styles and personalities are freed to process and articulate concepts and explore the who-what-when-where- and why of the curriculum-physically, interactively, and experientially (Peyton, 2002).” The use of puppets in the curriculum from preschool to college classes can offer many benefits. Research published in the *Journal of Child Neurology and the Pediatric Academy Societies* (2002) showed, using sophisticated imaging technology, that the use of puppets in play dramatically boosted blood and oxygen levels to the brain. The use of puppets prepares the brain for learning and is a powerful motivator in learning.

Puppet play stimulates the brain and opens communication for all ages. A professor at MIT, Erik Demaine, uses paper origami to teach robotics, the structure of proteins in human DNA, and the nestling of air bags in automobiles (Peyton, 2002). The play with paper origami “puppets” allowed these scientists to use their hands, brains and tongue to produce active and imaginative thinking (Peyton, 2002).

Research conducted by Vida Zuljevic (2005) found that teachers reported that the use of puppets in the classroom increased student involvement, motivation, and the development of student’s reading, oral language, and communication skills.

The use of puppets in education is not exclusive of reading, theatre, and language arts curriculum. C. L. Piazza (1999) indicates that the use of puppets may encourage students to “try out ideas and investigate on their own.” For example, the use of puppets in the science curriculum can be used to encourage students to relate to an animal that cannot be brought live into the classroom. A puppet can show how a

snake moves or the way a baby chick is hatched out of an egg. The student can use the hands-on approach to learning where they can touch and hold the realistic puppet (Lowe, 2000).

### III. Methodology

#### Research Design

The research design used was grounded theory. Grounded theory was selected since it is a design that does not begin from a theoretical framework. But rather, it focuses on a process (including people's actions and interactions) related to a particular topic with a goal of developing a theory (Creswell, 2008). From this applied study on puppet use with secondary and college-level students, the authors anticipate a possible theory since the research is limited for puppet use with older students and adults.

#### B. Procedures

After introducing the vocabulary words and a brief discussion of each, the observer passed out lifelike puppets to students. Students were placed in groups of two or three and asked to write a puppet script using the vocabulary words posted.

#### Participants

Participants were selected based on ease of availability and access for the observer. This was a convenience sample. The teachers who participated in the puppet vocabulary lesson were Candice and Andrew. Candice has eighteen years of experience as a learning support teacher. Her content area is history. Candice reported that she has used vocabulary illustration activities and vocabulary journal writing as the primary means of teaching new vocabulary with her students. Candice is very outgoing and enthusiastic with her students and is very receptive to trying out new methods to instruct her students.

Andrew has a total of fifteen years of teaching experience. He is new to the high school level having previously transferred from the middle school level at the beginning of the school year. He was new to the district last year, but taught at the middle school level (grades 6-8). Andrew has mainly taught new vocabulary through the development and use of unfamiliar reading prompts. Andrew is very conscientious and quiet in his teaching approach. Andrew is very willing to try new strategies to engage his students.

The students participating in the vocabulary puppet lesson are from grades 9 through 12, and are diagnosed as learning support. They have a variety of diagnosis and disabilities. The students are a mix of mental retardation, Asperger's Syndrome, autism spectrum disorders, Tourette Syndrome, ADHD, OCD, reading and writing disabilities, and comprehension problems, as well as, students who are socially and emotionally disturbed. Several students suffer from anger management issues. Some of the students also have vision and hearing difficulties.

The senior high school where data was collected is located in a small town in southwestern Pennsylvania and serves grades 9-12. The school covers both urban and suburban areas. The total enrollment of the school is 906 students with approximately 16 students per each teacher. Students score an average of 67.9% in state reading tests and 55.1% in state math assessments. Approximately 37.5% of the students in the district are economically disadvantaged and live in poverty according to 2006 data.

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(At the latest faculty meeting, the principal reported that 52% of the students now live in poverty.) Students with disabilities make up 18.7% of the student population. Approximately 10% of the students are minorities. Eleven percent of the students live in a single parent household. Nineteen percent of adults in the community have a bachelor's degree or higher. The school is making adequate yearly progress (AYP).

### Procedures

The teachers were asked if they would be interested in participating in learning a new method/teaching strategy they might use to teach vocabulary. The two learning support teachers

who were asked were very receptive and replied affirmatively almost immediately. The school principal was asked for permission to allow students to visit the library in a team teaching cooperative collaborative lesson, planned between the learning support teacher and the school librarian (observer) and data to be collected for use in a Ph.D. class assignment. The principal agreed and all permissions were given.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Observation took place on Friday, November 14, 2008 at a senior high school library located in southwestern Pennsylvania with two learning support teachers in the disciplines of reading and history and twenty-four of their learning support students in grades 9-12.

The data collection instruments that were used were observation, interview, and survey (questionnaire) formats. Data collection was based on field notes and oral interviews of the teachers. The students filled out an anonymous written questionnaire/survey on the use of the puppets in the lesson.

Interviews took place on Friday, November 14, 2008 in the high school library *directly* following the implementation of the puppet vocabulary lesson. The interviews were with Candice, a learning support history teacher, and Andrew, a learning support reading and English teacher.

Reliability was promoted by observing and interviewing two different classes and instructors. Some questions were posed in two different ways to check the reliability of responses. To ensure further trustworthiness of the data collection, the teachers were interviewed *separately* and *immediately* following the class so memories and perceptions were fresh in the teacher's minds.

### V. Ethical Considerations

Student questionnaires contained no identifying information such as name, age, grade, or gender. Passive assent was assumed per school district policies. Participants were under no danger during the study. Teachers willingly participated to learn new strategies.

### IV. Results

Both teachers expressed disbelief at the reception of the students for the puppet activity! They did not wish to share these thoughts with the observer prior to the lesson. Candice was "apprehensive at first

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because (some of the) students were seniors (12<sup>th</sup> graders), but to see them interact with each other my feelings changed. They were receptive to the activity.” Andrew also expressed that he felt the lesson might not be “received well” by the level of students in his class.

Andrew reported that these students can be difficult to control and keep on task, but when he saw one boy who can be a discipline problem making his voice different to “become” a buffalo, he was pleasantly surprised. Andrew reported that this student “takes a lot of attention and needs lots of one-on-one help.” The young man is also “able to work but often declines” and has “difficulty in focusing.” The boy was smiling and happy, clearly enjoying using his puppet.

Candice added that one benefit to the puppet use was that it “broke down the exterior of some of the kids who are tough and streetwise.” She saw students who “let their guard down because everyone was doing it.”

Andrew stated that, “My students responded extremely well to the medium of puppets! Some of my students have discipline problems. All of my students have learning disabilities. I was most impressed. Many of the students changed their voices in order to play the part. A good choice for differentiated instruction on various levels and paired or group work!”

“I won’t lie to you. I thought the idea of using puppets was crazy,” reported Candice after the lesson. Candice reports that she was surprised that the students used the puppets. She thought that the students might balk or be disruptive during the lesson. Candice reported that, “I saw an excitement in them (the students) that I haven’t seen in a long time. The students were happy and expressed their ideas freely.”

After completing the lesson, both teachers feel that there *is* a place and a benefit to the use of puppets at the secondary level. Andrew reported that a student told him that it took her back to her childhood and she enjoyed the use of the puppets. Andrew and Candice both report that the group work and collaboration was beneficial for the students. They also felt that the theatrics and dramatics provided an outlet for shy students to express themselves in a less threatening manner in front of the class. Both teachers felt that using the vocabulary words in a real world conversation setting (between the puppets) activated students prior knowledge and helped to make the vocabulary pertinent to how the students might speak in real conversation.

Both teachers also reported that they were surprised at how creative their students became when using the puppets. They created clever dialogue between the puppets and incorporated the vocabulary words appropriately. Candice said that her students felt a “freedom to talk without feeling foolish.”

Sixteen of the twenty-two students reported that they enjoyed the use of the puppets. Comments ranged from “they was a blast” to “it was something new and fun.” When asked if students felt that the method helped them develop an understanding for the meaning of the vocabulary words they responded positively. Twelve students acknowledged that the use of the puppets were a benefit to learning the vocabulary words. Four students said they did not help and five felt they provided limited benefits.

The response to the query of how the puppet use compared to traditional methods of vocabulary introduction was overwhelmingly positive. Seventeen students said that the puppets were a better method

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to teaching vocabulary, whereas only five responded negatively. Several compared the puppet use as a more favorable activity than the journal writing which is the usual method. One student reported that, “it was better than writing twenty words in a journal.” When asked if the puppet activity was a better way to learn vocabulary a student said that it was because, “you just write the words in your journal and you don’t understand.” They felt that the use of the puppets contributed to a better understanding of the meaning of the vocabulary words.

Another student said it “made understanding easier.” Other comments included that the puppet lesson made learning more interesting and it felt like “playing, not studying.” One student wrote that, “Yes, it helps by seeing it in person, because some people can learn easier by seeing it.”

Sixteen students enjoyed acting out the puppet scripts in front of the class with comments such as “fun,” “enjoyable,” and “even the shy people looked like they had a blast.” Five did not enjoy putting on the puppet play and one person was unsure if they enjoyed the activity or not. One student said that watching the puppet plays, “was a good laugh” and another said that “it was time to be funny.” The students all could appreciate the humor in the use of the puppets. The affective mood of the lesson was positive, happy, humorous, and non-threatening for the students. If they did not want to put on their script in front of the group they did not have to do so. This helped to remove any performance anxiety that may have resulted.

Thirteen students would enthusiastically like to use the puppets in future lessons. Three students are unsure reporting “maybe,” and six students would definitely prefer not to use puppets in the future. Those who responded negatively commented that, “no, it’s a money waste (waste),” and “it seems childish.” However, it was observed that even students who did not want to participate in the presentation of the puppet scripts were laughing and enjoying the antics of other student’s puppets.

Disadvantages include the cost and storage of the puppets. Jeffrey Peyton, founder of *Puppetools* and a noted researcher in the field of puppets having studied the topic for over thirty-five years, concludes that, “There is no question that puppets and play will help students. People standing primarily in the way are adults.” There is a perception that puppets are used only by very young children or trained puppeteers.

### V. Conclusions and Interpretation

#### A. Previous Research

There has been little or no research on the use of puppets at the secondary level. However, many of the benefits that have been explored and researched at the elementary level students seem to hold true for the secondary students, as well.

#### B. Implications

The implications of this research indicate that puppets can have a place in the secondary classroom. The secondary students and teachers enjoyed the use of the puppets and cited many benefits in using the puppets for the vocabulary lesson. There is even some evidence that the puppets might be used at the

college level to encourage creativity. The professors at MIT use origami to encourage learning and creativity in college level students. A YouTube video can be found from ASU where doctoral students are using puppets to teach correlational research.

Dr. George Semich, Ed.D., from Robert Morris University, recalls that “one of the most interesting and creative presentations I ever had in my EDUC6400 Reading in the Content Area class was the puppet demonstration that was done by Sandy Reidmiller. I had a class comprised of mainly secondary teachers and they were so engaged with this presentation that I would be quick to comment that this was the most memorable event for the entire class with myself included!” Dr. Semich also reports that he was unsure what the reception might be from the graduate students (studying to become secondary teachers) to the puppets, but he was clearly impressed when watching them as they enjoyed using and playing with the puppets in the reading vocabulary lesson. Their creativity and imaginations were activated.

After completing research on the impact and benefits of incorporating puppets into the primary science teaching it was found that there was a positive impact by puppet use upon the science lessons and curriculum. A group from the U.K. is beginning research on the use of puppets on secondary science teaching for students who are aged 11-16 years old. This research is financed and supported by Millgate House Publishing and GlaxoSmithKline.

### C. Future Research

The future is wide open for research on this topic. After the favorable response from the teachers in this short study, I believe that this is a topic worth investigating. Technology is becoming used more and more frequently in the classroom. The narrative pedagogy and the practice of exploration, play, and creativity without using technology is being used less and less. Students at the secondary level do enjoy interacting with each other and creating stories.

Jeffrey Peyton, the “puppet professor,” stated in a phone conversation on December 2, 2008 that, “Your research could be ground breaking!” and that I am “working in uncharted territory at the secondary or college level.” He felt that this research combined both practice and concept. Peyton also felt that the research “results are compelling enough for people to pay attention to it.” He offered to extend his hand to “share and consult” in the process of completing future research.

Peyton went on to liken the creative aspects of the puppets as “handheld language symbols” similar to the use of coloring books being used in medical school to teach anatomy. He also feels that if the teacher “injects play into communication you (can) change all chemistry and parameters of the classroom.” The classroom becomes a more of a “habitat” of the world. The response and use of the puppets create “real discovery.” As a theorist, Peyton believes that the use of this medium changes content and “takes people away from print.” The puppet medium is more emotive and visual for many students.

In a separate email communication with Dr. Howard Gardner, famed researcher of the multiple intelligences, he shared that he is unaware of any research with puppets at the secondary level and feels that this is a “clever idea.” Based on these responses, it seems that using puppets at the secondary level is an area rich with research possibilities!

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APPENDIX

Consent Forms

Passive consent is assumed.

Questionnaires

Teacher Questionnaire

What subject do you teach?

How long have you been teaching?

How have you taught vocabulary in the past? What strategies have you used?

How do you feel your students responded to the puppets in the vocabulary lesson?

What advantages did you note with the use of the puppets in the lesson?

What disadvantages did you note with the use of the puppets in the lesson?

After viewing and participating in the lesson do you find the use of puppets appropriate at the secondary level?

Did you find the use of the puppets beneficial for the students at the secondary level? In what ways?

Tell me what you observed with your students during their use of the puppets in the vocabulary lesson.

Student Questionnaire

Did you enjoy using the puppets?

Did they help you develop an understanding of the vocabulary words?

How did this activity compare to the ways you have learned vocabulary words in the past?

Was it enjoyable/fun to use the puppets in developing the script? Why?

Did you enjoy acting out of the play with the puppets (creative dramatics)?

Did you find it helpful to use the puppets in the lesson?

Would you like to use the puppets in your classes in the future?