
Conversation Partners for Young Language Learners

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I have been teaching private English lessons to young learners for nearly 20 years. Many of them enjoy the grown-up feeling of going to school and having homework. They willingly review their lessons at home by rereading their textbook and listening to their audio CD. However, classes are just once a week and finding opportunities to speak English between them is understandably difficult because the adults in their lives seldom speak English. By tapping into children's natural affinity for imagination and role play, however, I have found a way to create conversation partners for my young English language learners.

Scott and Ytreberg (1990) describe the use of an English-speaking classroom mascot who can help teachers and inspire students to speak English. Mascots help teachers model dialogs and teach songs. They ask questions that students may not be able to ask themselves. They comfort children and help them role play just as their favorite stuffed animals do. Finally, they are good listeners; some children are more comfortable talking to the mascot than to the teacher. Inspired by Scott and Ytreberg, I help my students create their own English-speaking puppets. Their puppets become their friends. They travel with them from home to school and back again and comfort them when they are down. Best of all, their puppets listen when the children want to sing, talk, or play in English.

Procedure

These steps may be helpful for other teachers who wish to introduce the use of conversation puppets in their English classes with young learners. They may be completed over several days, depending on the length and size of class or the age range of your students.

1. Set aside a box or basket to collect leftover, dated, cheap, or discarded (but clean) items that can be used to create a hand-held puppet. Especially useful are paper bags or fans, socks, gloves, mittens, kitchen utensils with handles, paper or plastic cups, scraps of fabric, and yarn. You will also need fabric glue.

2. When a new class begins, introduce your friend, the class mascot. Use your mascot to model the activities that you hope the children will do with their puppets later, for example, reading, singing, and having a conversation with them.
3. After students are comfortable with the class routine and speaking with your mascot, ask them if they would like to have a special friend of their own who could go home with them, someone who understands and speaks English, just as your mascot does.
4. Bring out the materials and let the children create their puppets. You will probably find that making the puppets is a great ice-breaker and serves to build positive group dynamics. Older children will help younger ones, and as they work, they will enjoy playfully talking to their new friends.
5. While they are working, tell the students to think of names for their puppet friends.
6. When they are finished (perhaps in the next lesson), ask everyone to introduce their new friend to the class. Then, tell a silly story or review a familiar song so that it is easy for the children and their puppets to respond or join in.
7. Tell the children to keep their puppet friends safe, introduce them to their families, and remind them that their puppets understand and speak English.
8. Include the puppets in future dialogs, story, and sing-a-long sessions.
9. Before class ends each week, give the children a “homework” task that specifically involves reading to or talking with their puppet at home. Model for them using the class mascot. For example:
 - Sing one of our songs with your puppet every day.
 - Tell your friend what you ate for dinner every day this week.
 - Show your puppet the calendar every morning. Tell him or her what day it is.
 - Use the calendar and count with your puppet 1, 2, 3 to today’s date.
10. Incorporate discussion of the puppets into your welcome, roll call, and warm-up routines each week, asking, for example,
 - What did your friend do this week?
 - Do we have a puppet with something to show or tell?
11. When new children join the class, give them a chance to create their puppets, too.
12. Encourage students to have their puppets interact with each other during class time, both informally and in simple puppet shows.

Conclusion

Imagination games, role play, and talking with toys, stuffed animals, or puppets are universal, developmentally appropriate experiences for young children. Creative language teachers can capitalize on those childhood activities to create an authentic-like environment for language practice from the child's perspective.

Reference

Scott, W. and Ytreberg, L. (1990). *Teaching English to children*. London: Longman

About the Author

Yoko Takano owns her own English language school where she teaches students from kindergarten through high school. She is a globetrotting traveler and a candidate for the MA in TESOL at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies.