



Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus dato' Razali Ismail

# Exploring and Exploiting Stories in the Primary ESL Classroom

Theatrical Storytelling, Using Puppets, and  
Children as Authors and Storytellers.



## Contents

Introduction .....	2
Objectives .....	2
Materials.....	2
Timetable .....	2
Procedures .....	3
Session 1a: Theatrical Storytelling.....	3
1. Visualisation .....	4
2. Five Senses .....	4
3. Mime / Actions .....	4
Worksheet and Activity.....	5
4. Sound Effects.....	6
Worksheet and Activity.....	6
5. Props .....	7
Worksheet and Activity.....	9
6. Words.....	10
Worksheet and Activity.....	11
Telling the Story .....	12
1. Character Voices .....	12
2. Faces and Gestures .....	12
3. Placement.....	12
Eye Contact .....	12
Worksheet and Activity.....	13
Session 1b: Creating Puppets.....	14
‘Hand’ puppets .....	14
Hand puppets .....	14
Sock/hand puppets.....	14
Marionette or string puppet .....	15
Finger puppets.....	15
Finger-hole puppets.....	15
Junk puppets .....	15
Origami Hand Puppet .....	15
Project.....	16



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## Introduction

Over four hours (2 X 2-hour sessions) participants have the opportunity to explore the strategies of theatrical storytelling, creating and using puppets for storytelling, and assisting children to be authors and storytellers.

## Objectives

Participants will:

- Learn and practice specific strategies for theatrical storytelling
- Explore ideas for creating and using puppets for storytelling
- Create and use simple puppets
- Explore strategies for encouraging children as authors and storytellers.

## Materials

Facilitator needs:

- PowerPoint presentation
- Sample puppets
- Sample stories to tell

Participants need:

- Participant's notes and worksheets
- Writing materials
- Scrap Materials for creating puppets projects (at home in own time)

## Timetable

Session 1a: Theatrical storytelling (90 mins)

Session 1b: Creating Puppets (30 mins)

PROJECT – create a set of puppets (own time)

Session 2a: Using Puppets in Storytelling (60 mins)

Session 2b: Children as authors and storytellers (60 mins)



## Procedures

There are a number of basic theatrical tools we can use to infuse drama into our storytelling for Primary school children learning ESL.

It is especially important to add interest to stories for young ESL students because they probably won't know or understand all of the words used, especially the first time they hear the story, but they will enjoy it and be motivated to listen (and watch) again and again, learning new words and expressions every time.

## Session 1a: Theatrical Storytelling

We are going to practise using each of your storytelling 'tools' one at a time, and then put it all together.

Before presenting a story in a theatrical and dramatic way, there are a few preparations to make.

### ***Face the Fear***

I wonder if the idea of theatrical storytelling (performed by you) fills you with fear and dread.

That's OK. That's normal.

What's also normal is for people of your age-group

- to be thrill-seekers,
- to take part in "extreme sports" – white-water rafting, sky-diving, bungee-jumping etc
- to ride a motorbike at high speed and weaving in and out of heavy traffic without wearing a helmet,
- to enjoy watching horror movies

It's all about the adrenaline rush.

***Allow yourself to be frightened – and do it anyway.***

*The point is: you are going to do this, so get used to the idea. You are going to be a teacher, and you need to be able to do this.*



## 1. Visualisation

As the storyteller, you should know the story inside-out, and be able to visualise every character and every scene. You should know the important characters like your very best friend so that you can answer without hesitation how they would act in any situation, and you need to know the sequence of events off by heart without stopping to think, as if you had been there watching it.

**NOTE: This does not mean memorise the story (word for word)!**

**As you retell the story more than once you may choose different words. But you should know the story - as if it happened to you.**

## 2. Five Senses

As well as being able to *visualise* all of the characters and happenings in the story, you should be able to use your other four senses, and impart to your listeners what they might hear, smell, feel, or even taste – so that they can feel like they were there too.

## 3. Mime / Actions

You are the movie or the picture book showing the story to these children. Besides making the story more fun and interesting, your actions will help the children to understand words they may be unsure of.

Rather than remembering a new English word with its BM translation, in their minds they will have a visual memory of your actions connected to the particular word(s).

Let's practise some actions that you may need in a story.

**Remember to *visualise* what you are doing, and remember with your other senses too.**

*For example:* You are eating – can you see the plate you are holding? Don't let it change size and/or shape as you take food off it!

*(Worksheet below – Participant's notes page 4)*



**Worksheet and Activity**

Mime each of these actions in three distinctly different ways .

*For example:* Show your feelings when you walk, show what it is you are eating, make it clear what clothes you are putting on.

First of all, think of three (3) variations for each:

**Walking:**

- 1 .....
- 2 .....
- 3 .....

**Eating:**

- 1 .....
- 2 .....
- 3 .....

**Getting dressed:**

- 1 .....
- 2 .....
- 3 .....

Now practise doing each one.

**VISUALISE!**

**FEEDBACK** : Watch your partner, and tell each other EXACTLY what you think they are doing!



## 4. Sound Effects

We are talking about sounds, not words – except if you want to use onomatopoeia, which can add a certain amount of fun and even extra learning.

As with the mime and actions, the addition of sound effects not only adds interest, but allows the children to create a connection in their minds between a new word or phrase and the sound you are making (rather than translating into BM).

**Mouth sounds** are fun – such as “blowing a raspberry” for car sounds and the like, or a “bleeehh!” to indicate disgust. The children can enjoy copying and/or joining in as these are repeated throughout the story. (Just watch out for hygiene – try to avoid having spit flying about!) Of course animal sounds are always useful to insert when relevant.

**Body percussion** is also useful and interesting and can add an element of beat and rhythm to your storytelling. This includes clapping, clicking fingers, patting thighs, stamping, as well as rubbing or slapping furniture – or anything else that strikes as an interesting (and relevant) sound.

### Worksheet and Activity

Consider types of sound effects. Decide how you could make them, and see if your partner can guess what the sound is. Choose two from the ideas below.

(NOTE: You can give some context to your sound effects first.)

**1. Some kind of vehicle or motor** – could be something in the house, or outside on the road, or the farm, or ... anywhere.

What makes the sound? .....

How will you create it? .....

**2. Some kind of creature** – animal, bird, fish, insect ... something alive. You could mimic its voice or its movement – or just the way it makes you feel - ...

What creature? .....

What is the sound? .....

How will you make it? .....

**3. A person or animal moving, walking or passing by.**

Who or what? .....

How does he/she/it move? .....

How will you make the sound? .....

**Show your partner and give FEEDBACK.**



## 5. Props

Hopefully you are going to be doing this often – telling stories to children. So although you might feel that putting on a fantastic performance with all the “bells and whistles” would be great (and it would), this is one of those situations where “less is more”. It might be best not to start something that you can't keep up.

The props have two main purposes:

- Interest, fun, excitement, entertainment
- Help with understanding

By all means add props for entertainment, but don't overstretch yourself, and be careful not to distract from the story itself.

Think carefully about the parts of the story where children might need help in understanding – an unfamiliar setting, character distinctions, or even individual words and phrases – and consider props (along with mime/actions, and sound effects) to help with understanding and make language connections in the children's thoughts.

So what props could you use?

### a) Pictures

Make sure they are big enough. The children will feel cheated and disappointed if you hold up a picture that is too small for anyone except the very front seated children to see it.

### b) PowerPoint

Resist the urge to put the story (or even other words) onto PowerPoint.

***Storytelling is a listening (and possibly speaking) activity and not a reading activity.***

So maybe some pictures on PowerPoint could be used to introduce the setting, and even the characters, and other sticky points in the story BUT do not let it overshadow the storytelling. You want the children to look at you, not at the screen.



c) **Costume**

As you tell the story theatrically, you could be presenting the characters and their interaction. To help the children know who is speaking at different points in the story you could use very simple costume changes – a hat, a bag on your arm, a scarf ... - to indicate who they are listening to. If the story is essentially a monologue you could dress up a little more extensively (throw on a coat, some shoes, maybe a wig ...) to get into character (and have some fun!)

d) **Realia**

Again to help with understanding at specific points in the story you could have real items to show the children during your story. This could be something like food, an item of clothing, a piece of equipment, or a small/toy version of something large like a vehicle or wild animal. If possible the children could be allowed to handle these items to strengthen the language connection.

e) **Puppets**

To better describe a dialogue you could involve puppets (or toys) in conversation with yourself. (This is different from telling the story as a puppet show, which we deal with later.) This is just another way to narrate a story involving several characters. The puppet(s) could be life-size (or nearly), life-like, something symbolic such as a handy broom-pole, imaginary (pretend there is someone sitting on that chair), or small such as sock-puppet or finger-puppet.

f) **The children themselves**

Children are generally thrilled to become involved in your story as props. You could ask them to be a tree, or the weather, or even some of the characters – the possibilities are endless. Of course, you may have to tell the story to make sure everyone has a turn at being something – but that's a good thing, right?

*(Worksheet below. Participant's notes page 7)*



**Worksheet and Activity**

Suggest some simple props for four (4) of the following stories:

1. Goldilocks and the 3 bears

.....

2. The Gingerbread Man

.....

3. Beauty and the Beast

.....

4. A story about a family with a mother, father, 2 children and a grandfather

.....

5. Moby Dick (the whale)

.....

6. A story about a cat, a turtle and a mouse

.....

7. A story about 5 baby ducks and the mother duck

.....

8. A story about (your idea) .....

.....

**Discuss and share.**



## 6. Words

This is the story itself, of course. You need to adapt the actual words you use to suit your students. That doesn't mean that they need to know every single word – much of their understanding (especially the first time you tell it) will come from your theatrical antics.

As mentioned above, it is better NOT to try to memorise the words – you will be so stressed trying to remember each word that you will lose sight of the important part of this activity – the children! So relax, and don't worry too much about the actual words – especially the first time you tell it. As you retell the story it will improve as you learn from the children's reactions.

However you do need to consider the following points:

### **Point of View**

Whose point of view are you telling the story from? Who are you, as the storyteller – are you one of the characters? Are you telling from 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view (“I went down the road ...”) or 3<sup>rd</sup> person (“he/she went down the road ...”)?

### **Tense and timing**

Stories told in the present tense can be very exciting - jokes are often told this way: “A man walks into a bar ...” – but you have to be consistent. Don't keep switching back and forth between Present and Past tense. Although children in the lower grades have only learnt the Present Tense, it's good for them to hear a story in Past tense as long as you are accurate and consistent.

### **Rhythm, rhyme and chanting**

Some stories (such as “The Gingerbread Man”) come with built in rhymes where the children can join in. If your story does not, consider the possibility of creating one which can be said three or more times during your story. Have some repetitive phrases that the children come to expect at certain points in the story – except the last time there could be a twist.

### **Allow room for theatricals**

You may need to pause in your words to make room for your actions and sound effects.



## PLAN

It's time to plan your storytelling, incorporating all of the things we have mentioned so far.

*(Worksheet is below. Participant's notes page 9)*

### Worksheet and Activity

Think about a story you are going to tell.

1. Choose the story – **you need to know it well**, and be able to tell it passionately. It can be a famous story, or something you made up.

.....

2. Which actions will you incorporate into your storytelling?

.....

Can your listeners join in and/or copy with this?

3. Which sound effect(s) will you use? (Can listeners join in with this?)

.....

4. Will there be any special rhymes, rhythms, chants or repeated sections of speech where the listeners can repeat or answer? Write the exact words:

.....

.....

5. What is the story plot or sequence? You need to know it really well. Write it here:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Spend a few minutes practising.

BE READY to show your classmates ... but first we are going to add a few more points.



## Telling the Story

The next three ideas will help your listeners to be sure which character you are depicting at any particular time, and also add fun and participation.

### 1. Character Voices

We have talked about using props to help your listeners distinguish one character from another. Children love it – and pretty much expect it! – when you use different “voices” for when your various characters speak. Of course, the children love to try and mimic the voices, especially if you have prepared a short rhyme or chant for each character (for instance “The 3 Bears”)

### 2. Faces and Gestures

Each of your characters can also have a particular facial expression and/or a gesture to go along with the voice. The gesture could involve, for instance, a particular way of walking. Once again, let the children get involved in mimicking this.

### 3. Placement

Rather than confusing (and boring) your listeners with “he said ... and then she said ...” for dialogues, you can use your body placement to indicate which character is speaking, along with the facial expression, gestures and voice. Before you get going, decide where each of your main characters will speak from. Even if the story character doesn't respond aloud to what is said, you can move to their “position” on your stage and just stand there and make a puzzled face, for example.

## Eye Contact

Every child should be looking at you. Don't start your story unless they do. And if they stop looking, pause and make sure you get their attention back again.

If you show them pictures or PowerPoint they will look at that for a while ... but then you need to get them looking back at you.

You need to know your story plan well enough to be able to look out over your audience with a roaming eye and make sure they are still with you without being distracted from your telling.

*(Worksheet is below. Participant's notes page 10)*



**Worksheet and Activity**

Think about the story plan you have just prepared.

Which character(s) could you use special voices for?

.....

Which character(s) could you use special gestures and/or facial expressions for?

.....

How can you use placement to make your dialogues clearer?

.....

***Discuss with your partner.***



## **Session 1b: Creating Puppets**

You can use puppets to enhance your own storytelling – as mentioned earlier, puppets can take the place of some of the characters in your story. However their main benefit is to involve children in storytelling.

Firstly, the act of creating a puppet is a learning experience in itself for the children – if this activity can be accomplished using only English for all explanations, then there is even more benefit.

Secondly, the puppets can “speak” for the children as they tell or dramatize the story – even very shy children are often willing and able to speak using a puppet where they wouldn't otherwise.

Puppets can be made from ... anything or nothing – remember the mention (under ‘Props’) of using an imaginary person in a chair? So you could even use an ‘invisible’ puppet.

### **‘Hand’ puppets**

Just dress up your hands (or the children's hands) using bits and pieces for clothing, add googly eyes, just draw/paint on your hand, or just let your hand go ‘au naturel’ and rely entirely on imagination.

### **Hand puppets**

There are many commercial (and cute) hand puppets where the operator uses the thumb and ‘pinky’ finger to operate the arms and the other fingers for the head. Most of these depict particular animals and/or birds.

This style of puppet can also be created by sewing or gluing cloth scraps, and adding a face and costume.

These puppets can ‘talk’ by waggling their heads around and waving their arms.

### **Sock/hand puppets**

Puppets in the ‘sock’ style are often also available commercially, where the operator inserts a hand and uses the thumb for the lower jaw and the other fingers for the upper lip and ‘face’ of the character.

This style of puppet is very easy to make using a sock and adding (sewing or gluing) facial features and other costume items.

These puppets are great for talking parts, and there can be considerable variation in their facial ‘expression’ using the knuckles. Of course, they have no arms to wave.

### **Marionette or string puppet**

These puppets are commercially available but are complicated to learn to use and difficult to make your own. Making them part of your story is also difficult, and they are probably best left unless you have a particularly strong interest in puppetry.

### **Finger puppets**

These are cheap to buy and easy to make – or you can just draw features directly onto your fingers.

They can be very simple, or complicated and elaborate. But they are very small, so it's difficult to give a "show" in front of a large group. And also they have very limited movement possibilities other than bouncing around when they 'talk'.

### **Finger-hole puppets**

These little puppets are made out of cardboard, decorated, and then have holes for the child to put their first two fingers through and make them look like legs. They are great for stories that involve a lot of 'walking' around. They can also have holes for (for example) the elephant's trunk or other suitable appendage.

### **Junk puppets**

Puppets can be made from all sorts of junk and scraps. (Make sure it is clean for children to use.) Some examples are:

- Wooden spoons – add a face and clothing
- Cardboard rolls – use as a body or head and decorate.
- Paper plates – use as a face, or fold over to make a mouth.
- Sticks / pop-sticks – add something for a head and face, and then dress up.
- Paper Bag – create a face, put your hand inside.
- Broom Pole / Mop – make a big stick-puppet

### **Origami Hand Puppet**

This is a simple idea using a single sheet of paper – scrap paper (single sided) will do, coloured paper or card is nicer.

- Fold the paper in 3rds lengthwise. (If desired, tape the open edge down – but this is not really necessary.)
- Fold the paper in half.
- Fold each of the ends back to the fold.
- Decorate.





## Project

*(Participant's Notes page 12)*

In your own time, before our next session:

***Create a set of puppets to tell your story.***

This can be:

- A story told by you, where you handle all of your own puppets
- A story told/directed by you with your friends handling some/all of your puppets. You and your friends can plan and prepare together, but you each need your own story and set of puppets.
- A story told/directed by you where the children in the class operate the puppets. (In this case unprepared classmates will be roped in to operate your puppets.)

NOTE:

1. Choose or make up your story.
2. Think about your story and the *type of puppet* that would be best for your story. (e.g. do your puppets need mouths? arms? legs? or does it not really matter?)
3. Remember that the story is more important than the puppets ...