



The Role of Puppets in Kindergarten Education in Cyprus

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Abstract

This qualitative research aims to investigate that if the puppets can be used as a teaching tool in kindergarten education and how it is effective for children to learn. The question that this research is trying to find out is who the pre-school language learners are. The data are gathered using two different kinds of research methods: observation and interview. It is a case study in which 20 kindergarten children are taught English with a puppet named Pepe and students are observed whether or not they learn the language. In addition, two kindergarten teachers are interviewed about the use of puppets in English language classrooms. The data show that puppets are engaging and motivating for young learners. They are effective tools, which can be used in English language classrooms. However the study is limited to the role of puppets in kindergarten education in English language classrooms. Further studies may focus on the role of puppets in kindergarten education in other fields such as science, art, and so on.

Keywords

Puppets, Preschool Education, Young Learners (YLS), Kindergarten

Subject Areas: Education

1. Introduction

The pre-school years which are between ages 3 - 5 are known to be a special time in the lives of young children. It is a crucial stage of life in which a child develops himself/herself physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially. The children's mental and physical abilities progress at a high rate from birth to the age of six. This period is the time in which they start to interact with the world especially their families and meet new people because preschool is the first introduction of the child to the outside world. They gain independence and self-control. Moreover, they start to observe the world around them and gain experience to the events when they interact with the people. In addition, the children are able to learn something new with a very high proportion. It

means that the period from birth to age six is a suitable interval for the children to take place of learning. Human beings' learning capacity continues in all periods of their lives however; learning is more intense in the pre-school years when compared to other periods. The early childhood education also enables the children to be successful in later school lives [1]. Crain [2] states that early childhood is a period of people's lives in which they develop themselves regarding physical, cognitive, emotional and language domains. This is a period when people are faster learners than other periods in their lives. Crain [2] adds that children go a lot further than the other stages in their world, and they decode the language in the early ages (As cited in Göktolga [3]).

So, the question that could be asked is "who are the pre-school language learners?" They are called as very young learners (VLYs) who learn another language in early childhood [4]. They are between the ages of 3 and 6 years. Children start the mandatory education when they are six years old. Children may not be able to read and write the language in these ages till they start the primary school. Children are always enthusiastic learners when compared to the adult learners. They want to please the teacher in the classroom activities. They have a go at an activity even if they do not understand why or how. Children feel more relaxed in the classroom compared to adults and they are less embarrassed in speaking in a new language. Moreover, they have a native-like accent with the help of their lack of inhibition. Meisel [5] states that speech is a miraculous development of infants, toddlers and very young children because they are not formally taught it. The children do not spend effort to learn the speech of the language (As cited in Göktolga [3]).

2. Literature Review

It is accepted as a common view that young learners are better than adults in language learning. However, how the teaching should be in young learners' education. The pre-school education curriculum is play-based because learning through play is fundamental to young children in education. It helps them develop the necessary skills in life. For example, puppets provide an essential link between learning and play which makes them wonderful teaching tools for at home, pre-school, classroom and in the wider community. Puppetry is a teaching aid, rather than a teaching method. The use of puppets should be coordinated with the curriculum and the syllabus to work well for the children language learning [6]. Korosec [7] indicates that motivation gets high and that is an important reason for including the puppet in the educational process as a means to reach the curriculum goals [8].

Rangarajan [9] states there is a misconception that puppets are only used for Primary and Kindergarten children but it is a fact that puppets are loved by all age group and can be used in classrooms. However, it can be said that puppets are one of the most effective teaching techniques known for 5- and 6-year-old children. With children of this age, puppetry can be used daily, and a direct motive can be associated with the play [6]. Moreover; the puppets are very good language teachers beyond being entertainers. Therefore, in the following section puppetry will be examined in detail for a better understanding.

2.1. What Is Puppetry?

Puppetry is a very old and traditional form of art that is still active in almost every culture. Puppetry is used in many different contexts, for spiritual, cultural, and educational teaching. Puppetry is a form of theatre or performance, which involves the manipulation of puppets. It is a very ancient art form, and is believed to have originated about 3000 years ago. Puppets have been used since the earliest times to animate and communicate the ideas and needs of human societies. Puppetry is used in almost all human societies both as an entertainment-in performance- and ceremonially in rituals and celebrations such as carnivals. Most puppetry involves story telling. Burn [10] states that puppets have united people of the world through a language unique to puppetry, consisting of more than words. Puppetry is a language, which conveys feelings, ideals and passions with a combination of gestures and words (As cited in [11]). All puppets come to life as characters that can portray different personalities and various traits and they cross all cultures. Puppets can share joy or sadness, they can be naughty or good, cheeky or shy, and when a child is engaged by a puppet they can learn lessons without even realizing.

A puppet represents a manipulated object by a puppeteer; they are often figures representing human or animal forms. Puppet movements are controlled through hand movements, sticks or strings. The most popular type of puppets for young children are stick puppets and hand, finger puppets rather than the more complicated one. Holler [6] suggests that had-puppets which are controlled directly from underneath are the most useful for schools. They are much simpler to make and far easier to manipulate. Improvisation is easier, and the puppets

have a quicker movement to which children respond. Moreover; they are in close contact with the audience, so that an active participation can be obtained [6]. Therefore how is the usage of the puppets in education? Can language teachers use them in their classrooms?

2.2. The Advantages of Puppets in Education

There are many benefits of using puppets in the classroom. Puppets are an aspect of our history and everyday lives. They are valuable educational tools which can be used both for adult and young learners. As puppetry is primarily a visual art, it can communicate to people who are not literate or who do not understand spoken language and it has been used in this way for thousands of years. According to Jean Piaget's theory, puppets play helps young children develop creative and cognitive skills by forcing them to use their imagination. They make up the roles, the rules, the situations, and the solutions. It is through imaginative play that children come to understand the differences between fantasy and reality. The real world becomes more real to children who have opportunities to pretend. Firstly, the puppets can be used as a teaching tool in language classrooms. Lennon and Barbato [12] indicate that the puppets are used as a tool to encourage children to express their feelings. In addition, puppets can change their behaviours (As cited in [3]). Low and Matthew [13] add that puppets have a valuable impact in engaging children and promoting language development (As cited in [14]). Peyton [15] states that puppets have a beneficial influence on learning and social development. Puppet language is unique in its ability to help teachers and children learn from one another, grow, and relate openly (As cited in [11]). The puppets create such an environment that children feel comfortable and self-conscious. Therefore, the young learners become less inhibited and they do not hesitate to take risks. This comfortable environment leads the students to explore the language and the conventions of the English language. Wegerif Mercer and Dawes [16] assert that the teachers could model behaviour and learning conversations via using puppets. This model could include ground rules for talk (As cited in [14]). They model the behaviours that teachers want to promote. Adults can model turn taking conversation by asking open ended question and use different voices. Puppets also provide students the face-to-face interaction that maximizes language learning. As indicated before, the puppets are colourful, tactile and manipulable. Therefore they respond to the children's individual learning visually, aurally and kinesthetically. Peyton [15] adds that puppets are beneficial for the students who learn the language kinesthetically (As cited in [17]). Moreover, they are teaching tools, which make lessons more fun than the traditional classrooms. They make the lessons more active and lively and bring fun not only for children but also for the teachers who use puppets in their classrooms. Mishina and Wallace [11] indicate that the puppets destroy the barriers between the teachers and students in the classroom. The teachers who try to keep themselves with a strict distance in the classroom become friendlier to the children with the help of puppets. This entertaining atmosphere in the classroom, which puppets create, makes the teacher to act more candid to the students. Moreover the teacher's strict looking in the classroom is diminished. By this way, the barriers between the teacher and the students can be broken down and easier communication in the classroom is achieved via puppets. Then, both the teacher and the students in the classroom have fun in their learning and teaching processes.

Puppets are not only entertaining but also captivating. Young children believe and relate to the puppets. Therefore students would like to enter and explore the fascinating world. Hunt [18] adds that young children accept the puppets as non-threatening sympathetic friends (As cited in [11]). Therefore even the quietest children in the classroom try to speak with the puppets. The young learners do not feel threatened by puppets and they trust them. The children may use puppets to express their thoughts, fears and feelings, which sometimes gets difficult for them to voice to an adult. They discuss even the sensitive issues via puppets. The young children work through their fears and they have a chance to tell their feelings without hesitation. Reidmiller [17] states that puppets prepare learners intellectually to learn. He adds that the puppets are powerful motivators in learning process of the children. The reason of it why it is that maybe they break down the barriers in the classroom and creates an entertaining environment, which brings fun for the children. Another point of view is the use of puppets in classrooms makes the children to feel more relaxed and motivated, so the "affective filter" which blocks learning according to Krashen [19], can be reduced. Similarly, it can be stated that puppets help children have masks that they can hide themselves. Therefore, children are avoided stressful relations and they can communicate much more spontaneously with adults. Brezigar [8] adds that puppets motivate children to work and reduce the "affective filter". Even the shy and apprehensive children develop their public speaking via puppets [17]. The reticent children get out of their shells and they become more expressive. The children can

express their thoughts, fears, and feelings, which may be difficult to voice sometimes, because the puppets act as “ambassadors” as well as friends. Burn [10] indicates that the use of puppets make the children to feel safer in the classroom. Puppets also help to improve communication skills, overcome language barriers and teach self-control (As cited in [11]). The students could also develop conversation skills such as risk taking and appropriate responses in a conversation. Peyton [15] adds that children become more responsive and motivated because the puppets vanishes learning barriers, oppositional behaviour, negative moods (As cited in [11]). Moreover the puppets act as a powerful communication tools. The fun atmosphere the puppets create increase the communication between both the teacher to student and student to student. Zuljevic [20] indicates that the use of puppets in the classroom increase the students’ involvement, motivation, and the students’ oral language and communication skills (As cited in [17]). Reidmiller [17] supports this idea by saying that puppets provide opportunities for student expression through social aspects of communication. Moreover Majaron [21] points to the fact that puppets increase the communication skills of children. Majaron [21] states that if the puppets are used in everyday conversations of children, it will enable them to have richer vocabulary. The children also become able to understand the semiotic-symbolic value of visual signs and the language of non-verbal communication (As cited in [8]). It means that students can develop their both non-verbal communication, which is very important in communication [8], and verbal communication skills with the help of puppets.

Furthermore; puppets can help students learn how to work cooperatively with other students in the classroom. Bennett [22] indicates that students who are working in a group to prepare and present a puppet play give and take and share their ideas so it would let them to learn working cooperatively. Moreover; it enables them to establish group cohesion. The group work makes the students to improve their social skills. The puppet plays make students to have a sense of belonging to a group. The students feel responsible to work and this leads them to attain success individually. Bennett [22] indicates that if there is a group goal, the individual students may become more willing to work harder. He adds that performances such as, puppet plays make the students to explore stories in cooperation with their peers and to improve their individual proficiencies (As cited in [17]).

Puppets encourage the children’s imagination, creative play, discovery and involvement to the activities. Puppets give children the opportunity to explore their creative side. They bring the story time to life. Puppets make the students to perform role-plays in the classroom. The teachers should plan their activities in which the puppets are combined with play. The children can plan and design everything from the story line to the puppets to the stage. Students use their imagination while they are trying to make puppets. For example; they can sew or use existing puppets. Puppets the students work on may be made of ice cream sticks, cardboard, paper plates etc... They also use their imagination while they are trying to give roles to them. They create different characters, roles, personalities to act. They are also an interactive way to introduce narrative to the children. The students’ involvement to the activities can increase because they take an active part while performing puppet plays. As it is proven, there are lots of benefits of using puppets in the children’s learning experiences. Puppets can be used from babies’ right through early childhood and beyond. They are suitable materials to be used especially in pre-school education. The children like them and they participate to the lessons in which puppets are used. Puppets can develop their imagination, creativity and discovery skills. On the other hand, they let the students to have fun in the classrooms. It means that the children both learn the language and they have enjoyable time, which is one of the most difficult things to do for teachers. The puppets also break down the barriers between the teacher and the students. Even the most reluctant students try to answer them. The puppets initiate the communication in the classroom. These properties show that the puppets are incredible teaching tools, which can be used at home, in classroom and in wider community. Therefore, the preschool English teachers should use them in their classrooms without any hesitation to teach new vocabularies and to create dialogues etc... The English teachers should plan their lesson plans in which the puppets are combined with play, which makes the learning easy for the kindergarten students.

3. Research Questions

The puppets are useful tools, which can be used in children’s education. In this study, the role of puppets in kindergarten children’s education will be discussed. The research focus on the relation between the usage of puppets in kindergarten classrooms and the students’ attention and involvement to the lessons in which puppets are used to teach English throughout the lesson. The research questions are;

- 1) How influential is the use of puppets with kindergarten children in English language teaching?

2) In what ways, using puppets bring advantages and disadvantages to the learning process of children?

4. Methodology

The study aims to investigate the usage of puppets in English language teaching classrooms in kindergarten education and their effects on the students learning of the language. It is a case study, which continues 5 weeks in Gaziveren Kindergarten.

4.1. Participants

The study has been applied in a kindergarten named Gaziveren Kindergarten with permission from the government. The study continues 5 weeks, one hour in a week. The participants consist of 20 pre-school children at the ages of 5. All of the students are Turkish Cypriots. The classroom consists of two groups of kindergarten children. They were gathered for English classes which they have one hour in the week. There are 12 boys and 8 girls in the classroom. There is only one disabled student who cannot speak. He shows his emotions by trying to show the objects and using his eyes. However; he still tries to attend to the lesson. The young children in the classroom are active learners in the classroom. They show their emotions easily. It means that when I ask them if they like something or not, they tell their opinions without any hesitation. They do not know how to write in English, even in their first language. The only thing they can write is their names. The style of learning of the children changes from one to another. They are visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners. They were showing their parts of body with the help of song named “Head, shoulder, knees and toes”. While some of them were trying to show their body parts, some of them preferred just to listen to the song and not to pretend. They preferred to sit silently in the classroom instead of acting it. This can be an example of that learning styles are changeable from person to person. Moreover, the students are taught English with the help of puppet named “Pepe” because it is a famous cartoon character in their country (Turkey and Cyprus). They like the puppet “Pepe” so much. They also find it interesting the pictures and the videos that I bring to the classroom. The subjects that they have learned in the classroom are “saying hello and goodbye, asking and answering their names (What is your name? —My name is Pepe), 5 common colours (red, pink, blue, yellow, green) and parts of body (head, shoulders, knees and toes, eyes, ears, mouth, nose) for five weeks. In the activities, certain items were used to encourage learners such as a bar of chocolate. They are always voluntary to start an activity but they get bored easily after a short time. Therefore, they should be included to the lesson with different kind of exercises. They like playing games and painting pictures in the classroom so I prefer to let them do these activities if time is left. They always wait for verbal encounter from me to encourage them. They want to be appreciated by the teacher with their works. The language that is used in the classroom is their native language (Turkish). The use of first language (Turkish) is generally preferred while even giving commands and directions to them. However; unlike the most children, they do not like to go around in the classroom. They would prefer to sit in their places and wait for the teacher to ask them questions. After the observation process has finished, two kindergarten teachers who works in the same institution (Gaziveren Kindergarten) were interviewed by the researcher. They are not English language teachers. They are pre-school teachers but they teach English to the kindergarten children because there is no English teacher in the institution. The gender of two teachers is female. They are experienced teachers. One of them has been teaching in kindergartens for 5 years and the other one has been teaching for 7 years. Moreover, both of them generally use puppets in their English language classrooms because they have used an English course book named “Cheeky Monkey” till this semester.

4.2. Research Method/Data Collection

The study is a case study. It is a Qualitative Research. It is applied to the 20 young learners at the age of 5 in Gaziveren Kindergarten. They are taught English with the help of puppet named “Pepe” which has been adapted by me for English classes in the following 5 weeks. Then, the children are observed if they learned the language (English) or not in this 5 week period. My last lesson with kindergarten children has been taped to video to be an example for the other researchers. In this study, two data collection methods are used: observation and interview. Firstly, the kindergarten children have been observed, which can be accepted as an experimental study. Then, two kindergarten children have been interviewed about the use of puppets in English language classrooms.

4.3. Observation

Observation is not always accepted as important data collection method in quantitative researches. Silverman [23] indicates that this can be because of the fact that it is difficult to conduct observational studies on large samples. Moreover, the reliability of the observations in quantitative researches is generally discussed because different observers may record different observations [23]. It is true that the observers may add their own feelings or they may miss something important in the classroom so it fails to attain the accurate data. However, observational studies can usually be used in qualitative researches. This research is a case study, which is qualitative one. The kindergarten children have been taught English for 5 weeks by me. Furthermore, their learning process in this five weeks also observed by me again. The last hour of my lesson has been taped to the video to be a sample and only a short piece of my lesson has been transcribed to the English. I transcribe the part that in which I ask them questions about my usage of “Pepe” in the classroom and their opinions about the lessons we have had until now. I try to catch their real opinions by asking them questions such as “Do you like Pepe?” “Are you happy that Pepe comes to classroom?”

4.4. Interviews

In this research, multiple methods are used. One of them is observation and the other one is interview. The reason why multiple methods are used in this research is to increase the validity and the reliability of my study. A study which depends on just observation of the kindergarten children in the classroom is not sufficient for the reliability of the study because Therefore, the interview was preferred to choose as a second data collection method to increase the validity and the reliability of the research. In addition to my five-week observation, two kindergarten teachers who have been teaching in Gaziveren Kindergarten for more than 5 years were interviewed. They are not English language teachers. They are kindergarten teachers but they teach English to the kindergarten children because there is not an English teacher who can teach English in the school. They teach English to the children with the help of the book “Cheeky Monkey”. The teachers were asked 5 open-ended questions about the use of puppets in language classrooms. They were asked if they experience using puppets in their English language classrooms or not. Moreover, they are asked about their procedures while using it, and their opinions about the advantages of them. Both of the kindergarten teachers are experienced teachers so they give sufficient answers to my questions. They both have experienced the use of puppets in their classrooms so they do not have difficulty answering my questions. The language, which is used in the interviews, is Turkish. Then, the teachers’ answers in the interview have been translated to English and transcribed.

5. Discussion

This study aims to investigate the relationship between the usage of puppets in kindergarten children’s English language classrooms and the effects of it in children’s second language learning. The first hypothesis that is received from the study follows: The puppets are incredible second language (English) developers. They can be used in kindergarten children’s language education effectively. They are not only a material which helps the teacher but also they act like a teacher assistant which means a different approach to the teaching method because instead of following a traditional role in the classrooms, teachers may teach cooperatively with the puppet. As mentioned before, Quintero [24] stress on that puppetry is a powerful tool for literacy and language development. Additionally, Lennon and Barbato [12] also mention that the puppets can be used as a language tool with children. The puppets provide the children to express their feelings and even to change their behaviours (As cited in [11]). Moreover; the study demonstrates that the puppets are important tools in language development. The kindergarten teachers who are interviewed also accept it by saying:

“In my opinion, puppets should be used. It is an important teaching method. The puppets attract the students’ interest.” (Teacher A)

“According to me, it is suitable to use puppets in English classes. The children participate to the lesson with interest because they like puppets very much.” (Teacher B)

As discussed above; the puppets are desirable language teaching tools in the pre-school education because they are materials, which are liked by the children. The children want to answer the questions and they raise their hands to participate to the lesson because the puppets make them take their interest to the lesson and it creates an enjoyable environment in which the learning becomes easier.

Besides, Low and Matthew [13] indicate that the puppets may have a huge impact in engaging children and promoting language development (As cited in [14]). Piazza [25] mentions that the students can use the hands-on approach to learning where they can touch and hold the realistic puppet (As cited in [17]). On the other hand, Keogh and Naylor [26] defend the idea that concept cartoons encourage children to engage to the lesson or topic because the puppets do not have the status or authority of the teacher (As cited in [14]). Therefore, in the experimental study; a popular cartoon character “Pepe” was chosen. They were familiar with it so they felt more relaxed while they were speaking with it.

Moreover, according to Majaron [21] the children learn the skill by simply watching their teacher’s frequent use of the puppet in dialogical plays (As cited in [8]). Mishina and Wallace [11] also state that the puppets can be effectively used to increase dialogue. On the other hand, Naylor [14] asserts that puppets allow teachers to take on new roles in the classroom. He adds that puppets make children to engage in dialogue in a non-threatening atmosphere. Hence, in the experimental study the puppet “Pepe” was used in conversation based lessons. Later on, Pepe goes around the classroom and asks every individual child to tell their names.

On the other hand, the study shows that the use of puppets in English language classrooms have lots of advantages both for the children and the teachers in the classroom. The puppets attract the students’ interest to the lesson, help them to gain confidence to interact with the environment and have fun while learning the language. Firstly, the puppets are helpers of teachers to make the children to concentrate on the lesson because the puppets take the students’ interest in the classroom. Quintero [24] states that visual and oral aspects of puppetry make it a strong aid for language acquisition. This statement is also supported with the pre-school teacher’s answers in the research. When they are asked “what properties should a puppet have according to you?” they answer:

“Firstly, I...it should be close to reality...It should be colourful...the colours of it should be vivid as to take the children’s interest...hmm...Of course, we prefer that it should be made of soft material...because the child damage it while he/she is playing with it...It should be made of healthy cloth...These...for me. (Teacher B).

As it is seen, the kindergarten teacher prefers the puppet should be real-like object to bring it to the classroom. Also, she believes that the puppet should have vivid colours to take the students’ interest. The other teacher supports this idea by saying that:

“The colours and the appearance of the puppet should take the students’ interest in my opinion” (Teacher A)

Moreover, young children accept the puppets as non-threatening sympathetic friends [11]. Korosec [7] also asserts that the children trust the puppet. The children believe that the puppets are like human; they sleep, watch over them, learn together with them, and listen to them. They may find the puppets more sincere than the adults may (As cited in [3]). Additionally, Marajon [21] states that in the child’s fantasy, each object has its own life and soul. Objects and toys take over the function of the imaginative world in which the child tell his/her problems and ask for solutions (As cited in [3]).

As discussed above, the children like the puppets so much and they think that they are alive-like. The conversation between the teacher as an interviewee and may be an example of it. The conversation follows:

“Teacher A: Yes, I don’t use it all along the lesson. I take it to my hand from time to time. And when I don’t use it, I put the puppet to a place in the classroom which is seen by the students clearly and the puppet watches us. I: (Laughing) For the purpose of making the students to be more silent in the classroom. Teacher A: (Nodding) yes, yes...”

The answer of the teacher shows that the children think the puppets are like us: they feel and they act in their world. The answer of the teacher is one of the most interesting for me because I have never tried it out in my 5 week teaching process. It is interesting that the children believe that the puppet watches over them. It is seen that we as teachers can use it as a classroom management tool in our classrooms. Wallace and Mishina [11] state that the puppets can become an integral part of classroom environment. They can be used to change the inappropriate behaviour and manage the classroom.

Furthermore, it is sure that the puppets affect the world of children positively. The children become more comfortable and open up to their world with the help of puppets [11]. The puppets create an enjoyable environment in which the children feel themselves safe. Mishina and Wallace [11] support that the strict distance between the teacher and the children in the classroom decrease via the impact of puppets. Not only the students and but also the teacher have fun in the lessons in which puppets are used as a material. The teacher who has been interviewed by the researcher thinks that puppets create a positive environment in the classroom too. She says:

“First of all, because of the fact that the children like the puppets, they get excited... They want to participate

to the exercises...They want to touch the puppets...I observed that the children participate to the activities in which the puppets take place...and I observed that they like it very much...At this kind of environment, the learning of the children reaches to the top...So... According to me, using of the puppets is effective...” (Teacher B)

As shown, the data which is received from the interview and the observation demonstrate that using puppets as a second language teaching material for kindergarten children has lots of benefits for the learning of them and the teaching-learning atmosphere in the classroom.

6. Conclusion

Considering all these advantages of using puppets in English language classrooms, it could be summarized that the puppets are incredible language teaching tools if the kindergarten teachers use them regularly and consciously. The puppets not only encourage the learning of the children but also create a funny atmosphere in the classroom. Children become more self-confident in future education. They develop their communicative skills because they feel more relaxed while they are talking with the puppets instead of an adult or teacher. Moreover, the enjoyable atmosphere that the puppets create breaks down the barriers between the teacher and the children. Both teachers and children in the classroom gain the benefits of puppets if they are used in the proper way.

Limitations

The study demonstrates that the puppets are important tools in both first language and second language teaching. However, it fails to teach some subjects with using puppets because using puppets is sometimes insufficient in the classroom. Moreover, using the same puppet for 5 lessons make the students to be bored. If the facilities are possible, a separate puppet for each week may be better to attract the children’s interest. They start to get accustomed of it and they guess what happens in the next stage so they lose their interest to the puppet day by day. On the other hand, teachers are required to be educated to use puppets. One recommendation could be that studies could be made as there is not much research made in this area.

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