

Puppets in Language Learning: Supporting English Vocabulary Acquisition in Young Learners Through Motivation and Interaction

Títeres en el aprendizaje de idiomas: Apoyo a la adquisición de vocabulario en inglés en estudiantes jóvenes mediante la motivación y la interacción

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Resumen

Los títeres constituyen una estrategia didáctica innovadora para promover la motivación, la participación y el aprendizaje del vocabulario en inglés, especialmente en zonas rurales donde los recursos son limitados. Por lo tanto, este estudio busca analizar su contribución al fortalecimiento de la comprensión y retención léxica mediante actividades lúdicas que promueven la comunicación en el aula. Mediante un enfoque mixto y un diseño preexperimental, se implementaron sesiones integradas al currículo que incluyeron teatro, cuentos interactivos, juegos de rol y canciones. Mediante encuestas y listas de verificación de observación, se recopiló y analizó información mediante estadística descriptiva. Los resultados muestran una alta aceptación de la estrategia utilizada en este estudio, evidenciando mayor interés, atención y persistencia durante las actividades, así como una percepción positiva del aprendizaje de nuevas palabras. Se concluye que el uso de títeres es un recurso accesible y eficaz para potenciar el aprendizaje del inglés, y se recomienda complementarlo con dinámicas cooperativas que promuevan una participación más equilibrada para asegurar la retención del vocabulario.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje; vocabulario; estrategias educativas; títeres.

Abstract

Puppets constitute an innovative didactic strategy to promote motivation, participation, and English vocabulary learning, especially in rural areas where the resources are limited. Therefore, this study aims to analyze their contribution to strengthening lexical comprehension and retention through playful activities that promote communication in the classroom; through a mixed-methods pre-experimental design involving 27 students aged 6–7, combining Likert-scale surveys and structured observation checklists to assess motivation, participation, and interaction, curriculum-integrated sessions were implemented that included theater, interactive stories, role-playing games, and songs. Using surveys and observation checklists, information was collected and analyzed through descriptive statistics. The results show high acceptance of the strategy used in this study, evidencing greater interest, attention, and persistence during the activities, as well as a positive perception of learning new words. It is concluded that the use of puppets is an accessible and effective resource to enhance English learning, and it is recommended to complement it with cooperative dynamics that promote more balanced participation to ensure vocabulary retention.

Keywords: learning; vocabulary; educational strategies, puppetry.

1. Introduction

English is one of the most widely spoken languages worldwide; therefore, it is necessary to introduce its teaching at all educational levels (Lucero *et al.*, 2023). In the process of learning a second language, vocabulary is an essential component; the successful communication for learners when using English as a second

language hinges in part on the mastery of vocabulary (Daidone & Darcy, 2021). If students do not possess a sufficient number of words in their vocabulary, then they are less able to communicate their thoughts and ideas and/or understand what is being communicated to them in English; thus, the improvement of the

teaching of vocabulary in second language acquisition is vital in educational settings, particularly those that present special challenges to language learners.

To inspire and improve student vocabulary acquisition, teachers have used innovative instructional strategies over recent years, including the incorporation of puppets as a fun and interactive teaching tool. Since they are animated objects controlled by either the teacher or the student, puppet shows focus on children and engage them in a fun and participatory way (Timmins & King, 2024). There are many international studies (including Khasanah and Burhan (2022) conducted in Indonesia) that have concluded that puppet performances in language classes help to attract younger children's attention, reduce boredom, and encourage their active participation.

In general terms, the literature agrees that puppets increase students' motivation, attention, and involvement during the learning process (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019). In addition, this instructional resource allows children to learn through play in an environment different from the traditional one; therefore, it is indicated that the use of puppets usually generates a pleasant learning environment, increasing children's interest and reducing their anxiety levels, which in turn improves their willingness to participate and learn (Férez & Coyle, 2023). In this way, puppets can serve as mediators between the teacher and the student, facilitating communication and allowing even the shyest students to express themselves without fear of making mistakes.

Various empirical studies support the effectiveness of puppets as a tool to promote learning, especially because

they allow the creation of interactive and emotionally safe environments for children. In Norway, Gyllstad *et al.* (2025) show that foreign language development in young children is strengthened when learning takes place in highly interactive, motivating, and emotionally safe environments, which encourage spontaneous participation and reduce anxiety. Likewise, Rahmi *et al.* (2020) found that students who expanded their linguistic repertoire through puppets improved their lexical mastery; they also concluded that children enjoyed the playful experience by gaining confidence to use English spontaneously.

In particular, Widiastuty *et al.* (2024) report that a finger-puppet storytelling program achieved notable results, since students became more active in class, expanded their linguistic repertoire, and improved their mastery of the words learned. In addition, they showed an increase in their interest in learning English due to how attractive and entertaining they found the puppet performances. Meanwhile, in another pre-experimental study, Brilianti and Sugirin (2024) confirmed that the use of puppet images as support for storytelling produced a notable improvement in elementary students' learning after the intervention. The rise in vocabulary usage shows that when using puppets in an activity involving storytelling, children learned and retained words more effectively in a foreign language.

The use of puppets had a positive effect on children when learning new vocabulary, as well as on improving many other skills, such as linguistic and socioemotional skills. For example, Ramasari and Virgia (2019) conducted a

study using hand and glove puppets with secondary school students to teach them how to speak English, and they concluded that the students who participated in the puppet-aided activity scored higher on oral proficiency tests than students in the control group sound. Therefore, from these results, there is quantitative evidence to suggest that puppet-aided instruction is profitable in developing oral proficiency in English as a second language. Consequently, they support the idea that using puppets is an important educational technique for teaching all aspects of the English language.

Nonetheless, in the context of each country, there are specific issues that warrant this current research effort. In Ecuador, teaching English as a foreign language in rural areas presents an even greater challenge due to limited access to pedagogy and educators with expert knowledge; in one such example from Cotopaxi province, insufficient resources for instructional materials, a lack of qualified instructors in English, limited motivation from students, and school facilities not conducive to language acquisition were determined to be some of the main challenges representing this area (Lucero *et al.*, 2023).

Many teachers cite barriers such as excessive numbers of students in classrooms, limited integration of technology, little parental support, and insufficient teacher training as being obstacles that impede the development of innovative methods for teaching communication in English, despite nationwide curricular reform (Alvarez *et al.*, 2025). In this scenario, it is necessary to explore creative and low-cost pedagogical strategies that can revitalize English

learning in rural settings with limited resources.

Along the same lines, a recent Ecuadorian study implemented creative strategies with digital puppets in the eighth year of basic education, obtaining statistically significant improvements not only in students' oral expression but also in formal aspects of language; students showed progress in grammar, pronunciation, and interactive communication (Escalante & Galora, 2023). In addition, by using puppets, a component of play and storytelling that is close to students' reality is introduced, which can increase the relevance and meaningfulness of English language learning in their daily lives (Soto *et al.*, 2025). In summary, addressing the problem of retaining new English words in Ecuadorian rural schools through a puppet-based intervention responds to the need to make learning more enjoyable, motivating, and effective given local circumstances.

This study proposes to analyze the use of puppets as an instructional strategy to promote motivation, participation, and interaction in English learning among 6- to 7-year-old students in a rural school. Specifically, it seeks to identify the level of motivation generated by puppets in vocabulary learning, describe the degree of student participation and interaction during puppet sessions, and explore students' perceptions of the use of puppets as support for language teaching.

This research is important both theoretically and practically. On the one hand, it provides local evidence of using playful methods to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and the findings could help teachers use different teaching

methods that involve students in the activity and improve their experience.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing context-specific evidence from rural Ecuador, where limited resources require innovative and accessible pedagogical strategies such as puppet-based instruction.

2. Methodology

The methodology of the study was created according to the methodology proposed by Hernández and Mendoza (2018), which outlines a systematic and rigorous way of performing scientific studies.

The research methodology is a mixed-methods design, based on combining qualitative techniques through observation of the classroom with quantitative methodology through the survey of students' perceptions and observations of their behavior during the implementation of a pedagogical intervention in the classroom. This type of research is descriptive and applied because it describes students' perceptions and behaviors in response to implementing an instructional strategy in the classroom.

This study was a simple educational medicine trial without a comparison group to evaluate how the implementation of a new teaching method impacts students' motivation, involvement, and interaction as they learn English vocabulary.

The subjects were students who attend a public primary school in a rural village in San Blas - Urcuquí. The sample of subjects consisted of 27 male and female participants between the ages of 6 and 7 years obtained through convenience sampling from those who fit into the case study category and who

had easy access to the rural community. Parents were provided with written consent forms, which were signed prior to their child participating in the study. School administrators were also provided with credentials for all researchers and were asked to provide consent for each student participant in the study, as per local regulations, ethical standards, and confidentiality between researchers and participants.

For one bimester of the regular school year, an instructional intervention took place. An instructional puppet program was developed to implement the intervention as part of the regular curriculum, since it integrated their planned activities with the units already developed by the teachers by adjusting both the puppet stories and situations to the relevant classroom materials. In total, five interventions were conducted within the normal class schedule, and each session applied varied playful strategies such as puppet theater plays, interactive storytelling, role-playing games, and songs, seeking to reinforce the target words in meaningful contexts.

The inclusion criteria considered students enrolled in the institution, aged between six and seven years, who had signed consent from their legal guardians and who regularly attended the planned sessions. In turn, those students who did not have corresponding authorization or whose recurrent absences prevented their continuous participation during the intervention period were excluded.

Data collection was conducted using a variety of methods to triangulate and provide a more complete understanding of the effects of the intervention. Likert-scale surveys were given to students

regarding their motivation, enjoyment, and interest in learning vocabulary using puppets. Classroom observation sheets and a checklist guide with field notes were also utilized to track the students' level of engagement and emotional responses during the intervention sessions. Together, both the Likert-scale data (descriptive quantitative) and observations yielded important insights into the students' levels of engagement/emotional response, which were ultimately used to describe the effectiveness of the intervention. The survey consisted of Likert-scale items adapted for young learners, administered orally with teacher guidance, while observation checklists were completed during each session to systematically record engagement and interaction.

As for limitations, it is important to point out that being a case study of one institution does not offer findings that may be generalized across the broader educational system. In addition to looking at the ethical considerations mentioned above concerning informed consent, it should also be noted that children participated voluntarily in puppetry activities, and their privacy was protected through anonymity when reporting the data collected.

To conclude this part of the study, the research methodology utilized a combination of descriptive qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide an overall understanding of the phenomenon under investigation by including student perceptions and behaviors observed throughout the pedagogical intervention. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies

and percentages), while qualitative observations were coded thematically to identify patterns in student engagement and interaction. The methodological design employs strategies adopted from both global and local studies as components of the methodology to provide consistency and promote discussion of findings in accordance with previous research literature.

2. Results and discussion

This section presents the results collected from the survey conducted with the participants as well as from the observational tools developed to assess the participants during their time in the classroom. These data were analyzed in an objective and logical way, so the impact of the use of puppets was documented based upon the use of them as a teaching tool to support learning.

These findings align with previous studies (e.g., Khasanah & Burhan, 2022; Widiastuty *et al.*, 2024), which highlight the role of puppets in increasing motivation and vocabulary acquisition; however, unlike prior research, this study contextualizes these effects within rural Ecuadorian classrooms.

Results of the survey administered to the students

The survey about the use of puppets was administered to twenty-seven students who participated in this study to assess their opinions of puppets as an instructional strategy.

Did you like the puppets that we used in class?

Table 1

Level of liking of the puppets used in class.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
I like them a lot	27	100%
It is fine	0	0%
I do not like them	0	0%
Total	27	100%

Every student surveyed responded positively about the puppets being a valuable resource; they found them to be engaging and fun. This is relevant because it promotes a positive learning environment for children aged 6 to 7 years.

Therefore, puppets are an appropriate strategy to strengthen English language learning.

Did you learn new words in English with the puppets?

Table 2

Learning new vocabulary through puppets.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A lot	27	100%
Some	0	0%
None	0	0%
Total	27	100%

The results show that the use of puppets generated a motivating and participatory environment for learning English vocabulary. In addition, most students stated that the strategy helped them understand and remember new words,

demonstrating a positive perception of learning and a greater willingness to participate in the proposed activities.

Did you have fun in the classes with the puppets?

Table 3

Students' perception of enjoyment in classes with puppets.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A lot	27	100%
Some	0	0%
None	0	0%
Total	27	100%

The results show that the students had fun in the classes where puppets were used, demonstrating a positive experience. Enjoyment in learning promotes attention and improves willingness to participate

in the proposed activities. In addition, it reduces shyness and stimulates interaction in the classroom.

Was it easy to understand the words in English with the help of the puppets?

Table 4

Students' perception of the ease of understanding words in English through puppets.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A lot	20	74.1%
Some	6	22.2%
None	1	3.7%
Total	27	100%

Based on the combination of context and visual support provided by the puppet characters to facilitate comprehension through associations of the visual and the word (word), we found almost all students reported using the puppet resources as a successful means of understanding English vocabulary. A small percentage of students indicated that they preferred other means, and thus some students may

benefit from further support.

The results shown in Table 4 suggest that visual scaffolding provided by puppets facilitates lexical comprehension, which is consistent with multimodal learning theories that emphasize the integration of visual and linguistic input.

Would you like to use puppets again in other English classes?

Table 5

Students' interest in using puppets again in future English classes.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A lot	26	96.3%
Some	1	3.7%
None	0	0%
Total	27	100%

The results reflect a high level of interest in using puppets again in future classes, which demonstrates that the strategy was meaningful for the students. Overall, the resource will continue to be applied and may be sustainably integrated into English

literacy pedagogy. In addition, the desire to repeat the experience suggests that students perceive the strategy as useful and motivating.

Did the puppets help you speak more in English?

Table 6

Students' perception of the help provided by puppets to speak more in English.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A lot	27	100%
Some	0	0%
None	0	0%
Total	27	100%

The results obtained show that the students perceived that the puppets helped them speak more in English during the activities. This suggests that the use of this resource may have fostered a more comfortable and motivating environment, facilitating children's oral participation. In addition, interaction

with puppets generated a playful and fun setting that promoted spontaneous use of the language. Therefore, the strategy contributed to strengthening students' willingness to communicate orally in English.

Did you like the stories or games with the puppets?

Table 7

Students' preference for stories or games developed with puppets.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
I like them a lot	27	100%
It is fine	0	0%
I do not like them	0	0%
Total	27	100%

The results show that the stories and games with puppets were fully accepted by the students in this type of activity. This indicates that these dynamics facilitate learning by maintaining children's interest and attention. In addition, integrating

vocabulary into games and stories allows for a more meaningful understanding of the content.

Did the puppets make the class more fun?

Table 8

Students' perception of the level of enjoyment generated by puppets in class.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
I like them a lot	27	100%
It is fine	0	0%
I do not like them	0	0%
Total	27	100%

The results show that the puppets contributed to making the class more enjoyable, which promotes a positive learning environment. This aspect is important because enjoyment increases motivation and improves willingness

to participate in activities. In addition, a dynamic class makes it easier for students to become involved without fear of making mistakes.

Did you feel happy when we played with the puppets?

Table 9

Students' perception of emotional well-being during puppet activities.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A lot	26	96.3%
Some	1	3.7%
None	0	0%
Total	27	100%

The data indicates that the pupils had a positive emotional experience while engaging in the puppet activities, thus validating their enjoyment and well-being within the classroom environment. This increased well-being leads to enhanced motivation and readiness to

engage in learning, especially for young children. Also, having positive emotional engagement can enhance student participation and interaction with the language.

Would you like there to be different puppets in the classes?

Table 10

Students' interest in incorporating a variety of puppets in English classes.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A lot	27	100%
Some	0	0%
None	0	0%
Total	27	100%

The results show that the students want to have different puppets in the classes, which reflects enthusiasm and motivation to continue with the strategy. The interest in puppet resources demonstrates how the addition of options will allow you

to maintain interest and help keep the sessions alive. Using alternate characters opens up possibilities for working with various types of vocabulary and different types of communication opportunities.

Draw or write something you liked about the puppets

Students' comments clearly show they liked the puppets because they had fun and played during the class. This is apparent in the drawings and positive comments made by the students. Additionally, many kids drew pictures of the different characters or scenes involving the puppets. This shows they were very interested in using this visual tool. Overall, this question supports the finding that using puppets provides students with a powerful source of motivation and an enjoyable learning experience.

Results from the observation checklist.

The results of the student's participation level, student's engagement level, and student's interaction level will be found in this section based on calculating the data collected from the observation checklist used on the student while participating in the different lessons using the puppets as an added resource to enhance the learning process. The observation checklist used for this learning experience organized the data collected during each lesson by the type of indicator established for the checklist, allowing for a summary (group) of the results achieved by the group.

Table 11

Level of participation, engagement, and interaction observed during the use of puppets.

Dimension	Indicator	Low	Medium	High
Participation	Attention	0	0	5
	Response to stimuli	0	1	4
	Contribution	3	2	0
Engagement	Motivation	0	0	5
	Persistence	0	0	5
	Interaction with the material	0	3	2
Interaction	Interaction with classmates	2	3	0
	Interaction with the puppets	0	1	4
	Interaction with the teacher	0	5	0

Note. The values represent how many observations were found for each indicator at each of the three levels (Low, Medium and High).

The values represent how many observations were found for each indicator at each of the three levels (Low, Medium and High).

The level of engagement demonstrated during the lifting of puppets was measured in the high level of focus and engagement with stimuli, which indicates that the students-maintained focus and had positive reactions during the

activities involving puppets. However, with respect to contributions, there were more observations with low and medium participation levels. This indicates that not every student contributes equally on an ongoing basis even though they appear to be engaged, and this means that it will be necessary to develop more strategies for allowing all students to have opportunities to provide verbal participation during

these activities. Overall, there was a high level of positive participation in general, but there are different participation levels in the contributions.

Based on research, engagement levels are high, indicating strong levels of motivation and persistence towards activities that took place with puppets and an overall positive attitude and continuity in relation to these activities. However, it appears that student interactions with materials were most often at a moderate level, indicating that some participants may need additional time or guidance before they can be fully engaged with the puppet as a resource for their play. This demonstrates that this strategy was effective in “capturing” the interest of the group in creating engagements; thus, it was a successful resource for sustaining motivation within the classroom.

According to the interaction dimension of the activity, most students demonstrated medium levels of interaction with both their classmates and teachers. These results indicate that students maintained a constant but moderate amount of communication during the activity. The level of interaction with the puppets was high within most of the videos recorded, which suggests this resource was appealing to the students and aided in their participation. However, it seems as though the fact that the level of interaction with the teacher remained within the range of mediums depicts that the teacher regularly provided guidance and was a significant factor throughout the course of the students’ activities.

Based on the results obtained, it can be inferred that the use of puppets is an efficient means of helping children from ages 6-7 learn new vocabulary in English by providing them with motivation and

creating a playful atmosphere to enhance their ability to focus on and take part in the educational process. This finding correlates to other studies demonstrating that children’s learning and retention of new information occur more easily when they can interact with both visual and dynamic resources such as puppets (Khasanah & Burhan, 2022). More recent studies have suggested that the use of puppets will create a positive emotional environment for children, thereby helping them gain confidence in using their new language (Chee Luen *et al.*, 2023).

However, according to observations made during the course of teaching, there is evidence that while students appear to be motivated and attentive to the media they are using, their levels of involvement with one another and the amount of peer feedback provided may not all be the same (Luen, 2021) and match similar findings in other studies. In addition, to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to participate and an open channel of communication between all students and teachers, each of the resources used must be accompanied by teacher involvement (Luen, 2021). Therefore, using puppets in the classroom has been found to be an effective and innovative method of assisting students in developing vocabulary through engagement in low-cost, easily accessible materials; improving the quality of learning at the time of study, while also allowing for greater interaction between students and teacher.

These results reinforce findings from Chee Luen *et al.* (2023) regarding emotional engagement, while also highlighting differences in peer interaction levels, suggesting the need for structured cooperative strategies.

3. Conclusions

The conclusions of the research suggest that puppet use in instruction assists with the learning of English vocabulary by children between the ages of 6 and 7, since both were found to have high levels of motivation and acceptance throughout this project. The positive perception students had of the puppets is also supported through the level of attention and persistence demonstrated during the recording of data on the observation checklist. This provides evidence that this teaching tool will help create a learning environment conducive to learning.

The conclusion from the study is that puppets are an important teaching aid in rural school settings, as they foster participation and enable students to build vocabulary by using a mixture of movement and visual activities. This puppet teaching strategy also maintained student interest and motivation; therefore, it can be concluded that early childhood EFL instruction is enhanced when interactive and motivational methodologies are used as teaching strategies.

The analysis of the children's response to the puppet activity was based on the group level of attention and motivation, which were observed to be high. However, when examining the level of contribution & interaction from each child, it was noted that the level of interaction & contribution from the students varied greatly; therefore, additional pedagogical strategies to enhance the equitable contribution & interaction amongst students should be implemented. To accomplish this, it is suggested that cooperative learning strategies and guided roles be integrated

into the puppet teaching strategy to allow for more regular participation by all the students during the puppetry-based lessons.

In conclusion, puppet use supports the educational experience as well as the socio-emotional well-being of students by providing positive experiences, decreasing observed shyness, and increasing students' confidence in their ability to engage with others, which ultimately makes utilizing puppets a versatile and inexpensive method for teachers to include in their plans while improving how they teach language at the beginning and elementary levels. Overall, the findings suggest that while puppets significantly enhance motivation and vocabulary learning, structured interaction strategies are necessary to ensure equitable participation among students.

4. Authors' contribution

MD: Literature review, data collection, conclusions, and article final revision.

HQ: Data collection, results analysis, discussion.

PS: Literature review, data collection, discussion.

GP: Data collection, results analysis, discussion.

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