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FROM STORYTELLING TO SCREEN: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL PUPPETRY IN TRANSFORMING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

In the evolving landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT), digital technologies offer new ways to engage learners and enhance teaching practices. One such innovation—digital puppetry—combines storytelling, animation, and voice tools to create interactive, learner-centered materials. This article explores how digital puppetry can empower teachers to design and implement creative language-learning resources. It outlines theoretical foundations (e.g., constructivism, second-language acquisition), aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), and presents practical pedagogical strategies for teachers. Implications for teacher training, material design, and classroom integration are discussed, highlighting potential benefits such as improved learner motivation, speaking confidence, and multimodal literacy. This academic work employs a conceptual and pedagogical analysis of digital puppetry tools within teacher education. ***Keywords:*** *Digital-Puppetries, Language Teaching, Quality Education, Designing Digital Puppetries, Multimodal Strategy, Animation*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone profound changes influenced by rapid technological advancements, new pedagogical frameworks, and the increasing need for learner-centered, engaging instructional practices. As the educational landscape shifts towards multimodal, interactive, and experiential learning environments, both teachers and learners require innovative tools that can break away from traditional patterns of language instruction. Among these emerging innovations, *digital puppetry* has gained attention for its capacity to combine storytelling, animation, drama, and technology into a single creative platform. Although puppetry has existed for centuries as a cultural and narrative art form, its digital transformation offers unique pedagogical possibilities for language learning. Digital puppetry enables teachers to create animated characters, simulate dialogues, enact role plays, and design authentic communicative scenarios, all within a

virtual environment. These features make it especially suitable for enhancing speaking, listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, social communication, and narrative competence—skills that are central to ELT.

Despite its potential, digital puppetry remains largely unexplored in the Indian educational context. Teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and even researchers have limited awareness of how the technique works, how it can be integrated into lesson plans, or which digital tools can be used to create puppetry-based learning modules. With NEP 2020 emphasizing digital pedagogy, blended learning, creativity, and experiential approaches, the integration of digital puppetry into ELT becomes not only relevant but urgently needed.

Theoretical Foundations

Digital puppetry draws upon multiple theoretical frameworks. From a constructivist perspective, learners actively build knowledge rather than passively receive it; creating characters and dialogues in a puppet scenario encourages collaboration, creativity, and reflection. Social-constructivist theory emphasizes interaction and scaffolding, which puppet-based tasks support through peer collaboration and teacher facilitation.

Digital puppetry in ELT is grounded in **constructivist** and **social-constructivist** learning theories. Learners construct knowledge actively through interaction, collaboration, and creative production. When students design scripts, voice characters, and manipulate animations, they engage in authentic language use within meaningful contexts.

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that learners acquire languages more efficiently when anxiety is low and motivation high. Digital puppetry offers a "masking effect" (students speaking through alternative personas), reducing performance pressure and allowing risk-taking. Research on digital puppetry in language teaching supports this: for example, Thamesh & Aziz (2023) found that pre-service ESL teachers who engaged in digital puppetry projects showed improved speaking and writing performance.

Moreover, **Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development** (ZPD) is evident in collaborative puppet projects where peer-interaction and teacher scaffolding enhance linguistic competence. Thus, digital puppetry merges language, creativity, and technology within a supportive learning environment.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL PUPPETRY

a) Origins in Animation and VFX Technologies

Digital puppetry originated from early animation techniques and computer graphics used in entertainment industries. Early films like *Toy Story* (1995) demonstrated the capability of digital characters to express emotions and perform actions that mirror human movements. These developments contributed to the rise of:

- Motion capture technology
- 2D and 3D animation tools
- Virtual avatars
- Real-time animation engines

These technologies slowly expanded beyond entertainment into educational applications.

b) Growth through Computer-Mediated Educational Tools

During the 2000s and 2010s, as multimedia learning platforms evolved, educators began experimenting with animated characters to teach concepts. Educational animations, comic-strip tools, avatar-based learning, and virtual classrooms paved the way for digital puppetry in education.

c) Global Development in Education

In many Western countries, digital puppetry is employed in:

- Early literacy development
- Speech and language therapy
- ESL/EFL classrooms
- Drama education
- Inclusive education for children with autism and speech delays
- Remote teaching environments

The United States, UK, Australia, and Canada have experimented with character animation in virtual learning environments.

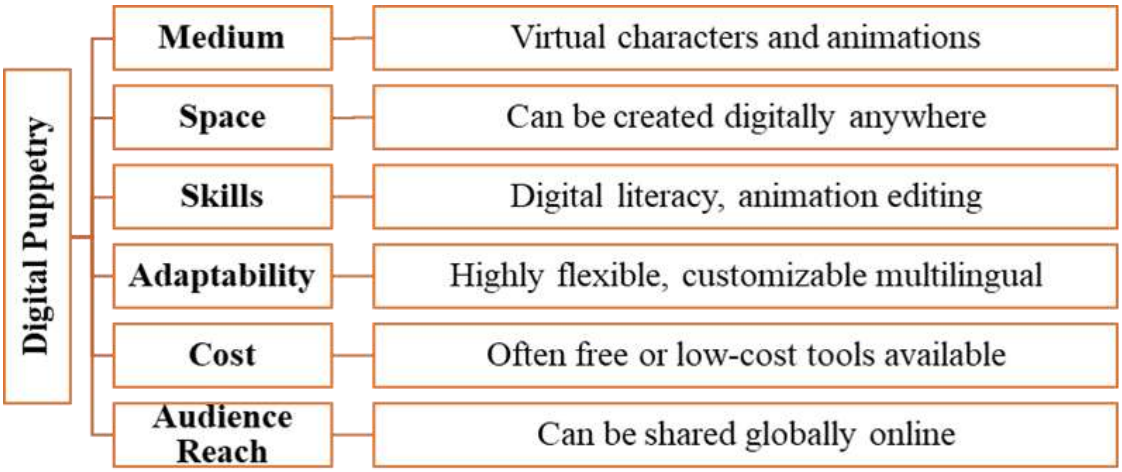
d) Indian Context: Slow but Emerging

India has a rich heritage of traditional puppetry—Kathputli, Bommalattam, and Gombeyata—yet digital puppetry is still in its infancy. Reasons include: Limited exposure among teacher educators, lack of digital training programs, inadequate ICT infrastructure in rural colleges, minimal research on digital puppetry in ELT and absence of digital tools in the B.Ed. curriculum. However,

post-COVID digital acceleration has opened new pathways. Teachers are more comfortable with ICT tools, and institutions increasingly encourage digital content creation

Features of digital puppetry

The necessary features of the digital puppetries are given below in a nutshell.



DIGITAL PUPPETRY AND LANGUAGE SKILLS (LSRW)

Digital puppetry can be effectively mapped onto the four language skills:

- **Listening**: Students listen to puppet dialogues, peer-recorded voices, or teacher-modelled scenarios; they can respond or record replies
- **Speaking**: Learners animate and voice their own puppets, rehearse dialogues, role-play interviews or scenarios, and receive peer/teacher feedback
- **Reading**: Teachers can integrate scripts, subtitles, prompt cards, or folded storylines for students to read and convert into puppet dialogues
- **Writing**: Students draft puppet scripts, revise based on peer feedback, and publish digital puppet videos or animations, thus practising composition, coherence, and audience awareness

Empowering Teachers: Designing Digital-Puppetry Materials

To empower teachers, a coherent design process is helpful—one such model is the ADDIE framework (Analyse →

Design → Develop → Implement → Evaluate). Teachers can follow these steps:

1. **Analyse –** Identify learner needs, language objectives (e.g., speaking fluency, vocabulary in context), available digital tools and resources
2. **Design –** Decide on the puppet scenario (e.g., travel interview, cultural dialogue, job-interview role-play), storyboard the dialogue, plan scaffolded speaking tasks
3. **Develop –** Using tools such as *Toontastic*, *Plotagon*, *Animaker*, or simpler platforms like *PowerPoint with voice narration*, teachers create puppet animations or avatars
4. **Implement –** Introduce the task in class: model with puppet, then students work in pairs/groups to produce their own animations, record voice, present to class or upload to learning-management system
5. **Evaluate –** Use rubrics to assess language (pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy), creativity, collaboration, and digital presentation. Collect student feedback and reflect for next cycle

Research shows that such teacher-designed digital-puppetry materials can significantly enhance linguistic and motivational outcomes. For example, a study of Malaysian pre-service teachers' digital-puppetry module revealed that teachers perceived improved skills in creating multimodal ELT materials.

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES AND CLASSROOM INTEGRATION

Here are practical strategies for integrating digital puppetry into ELT classrooms:

- **Role-play Interview with Puppets**: Students script and animate a job interview between two characters (one puppet as employer, one as applicant). They record voice and present to peers.
- **Digital Story-Retell**: After reading a short narrative, students create puppet scenes summarising key events, focusing on coherence and emotion.
- **Peer-Feedback Workshop**: Students view classmates' puppet-videos, provide comments on language use and presentation, then revise and re-publish.
- **Flipped-Classroom Setup**: Teacher provides a short puppet video as homework introducing vocabulary and context; in class students reproduce or extend the scenario in groups.

- **Multiliteracies Integration**: Puppetry integrates voice, visuals, text and movement—aligning with 21st-century literacies (digital, media, multimodal).
- **Building Soft Skills and Classroom Management Skills:** For teacher trainees, digital puppetry helps develop: clear verbal instructions, tone modulation for classroom engagement, storytelling competence, confidence in communication, audience interaction strategies. These are essential skills for effective classroom teaching.

SDG-Aligned Pedagogy through Digital Puppetry

Digital puppetry meaningfully aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting inclusive, equitable, and creative learning opportunities. In particular, **SDG 4: Quality Education** is supported as digital puppetry enables teachers to deliver interactive, learner-centered instructional experiences that improve communication skills, conceptual understanding, and student engagement. It also contributes to **SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure** by integrating emerging digital tools into classroom practice, encouraging innovation among teacher trainees, and strengthening digital pedagogical capacity in teacher education. Moreover, digital puppetry promotes cultural expression and storytelling, supporting **SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities** by giving diverse learners—including rural, tribal, and differently-abled students—accessible, multimodal avenues to participate in learning. Through cost-effective tools and open-source platforms, digital puppetry further resonates with **SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals**, encouraging collaboration among educators, technologists, and institutions to create scalable, inclusive educational resources. Thus, digital puppetry becomes a transformative approach that not only enhances ELT pedagogy but also advances global sustainable education priorities

EXPLANATION OF KEY TOOLS & PLATFORMS

Here are some digital puppetry / animation platforms that teacher trainees can use to develop communication materials, along with their advantages and practical uses:

Platform	Description	Strengths / Uses for Communication Skills
Toontastic 3D (Google)	A free app for storytelling; users create 3D animated characters and record voices.	Very user-friendly, great for role-play, story retelling, interviews, and pronunciation practice.
Puppet Pals HD	iPad app where users choose or draw characters, animate, and voice them.	Ideal for dialogue creation, peer conversations, micro-teaching, and expressive voice use.
Plotagon	Desktop/web tool to animate "film-style" scenes with 3D characters by writing scripts.	Good for scripting classroom dialogs, monologues, interviews, and more complex communicative tasks.
Animaker	Web-based animation tool with templates, characters, voiceover, and export options.	Suitable for designing puppet-based scenarios, explainer dialogues, educational role plays.
Powtoon	Animation and video creation platform with drag-and-drop characters and text.	Useful for animated story-teaching, class introductions, and puppet-style projects.
Vyond	Professional-level web animation tool (paid) that supports character animation, lip-sync, and voice.	High-quality puppet animations; ideal for teacher trainees designing polished materials & training videos.
ChatterPix Kids	Mobile app for creating "talking" pictures — you record a voice and it "talks."	Simple but powerful for younger or less tech-savvy trainees; for voice practice and expressive dialogue.

CONCLUSION

Digital puppetry represents a transformative fusion of creativity, technology, and pedagogy in English language education. By shifting storytelling from the stage to the screen, it empowers teachers to design engaging, inclusive, and culturally relevant materials. The approach enhances students' communicative competence, digital literacy, and confidence while aligning with global educational goals.

For sustainable adoption, policymakers and teacher-education institutions must provide training, infrastructure, and resources that enable educators to explore such creative methodologies. As ELT moves toward technology-enriched learning ecosystems, digital puppetry emerges as a compelling strategy for shaping the future of language education.

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