Communicative Puppet Play Techniques— in a College Foreign Language Classroom

When Diane Forbes traveled to Nazareth College in Rochester, New York, for a job interview, she took a friend with her—Atila, a red bull puppet with white horns, a gold ring in his nose, black-brown eyes and a tuft of gray hair on top of his head. Ms. Forbes has been working with Atila for about a year in her Spanish classes at Pennsylvania State University, where she is a doctoral candidate in Spanish. Although Atila originally rode along with her to the job interview for "security," he ended up performing a more active role at Nazareth.

Told on Sunday night that she was to teach a demonstration class Monday morning before two faculty observers, Ms. Forbes decided "just by accident" to use Atila. She admits to being nervous, but not ill-prepared. "I had the students ask each other what they did over the weekend," Ms. Forbes said. Then she introduced Atila with a brief story about his younger days in Spain.

"His name is 'Atila el Huno', for Attila the Hun," she explained to the class. "He is a bull from Spain and the name is a joke because he pretends to be ferocious at times but is really very sweet and gentle. He has the reputation for being a night owl, an out-on-the-town type (a personality developed by my students), but Atila is really very innocent," she added.

Atila then met everyone in the class, engaging the students in conversation, and ultimately, helping teach a lesson on the imperfect past tense and indirect object pronouns.

"The students seemed to enjoy the class," Ms. Forbes said. "I was cleaning the blackboard and one came up to me and said, "Hey, Okay!" The students were not the only ones impressed by Ms. Forbes' teaching technique. One of the two faculty observers, Dr. Edward Malinak, an associate professor of Spanish who has been at Nazareth for 10 years, said he was "a little bit surprised" when Ms. Forbes introduced Atila to the class, "But I figured she would work him into the lesson. My colleague and I were both impressed. She was quite confident—and effective. It was her class that day. Ms. Forbes got the job. We were looking for the best candidate...and we found her," said Dr. Malinak.

Atila also left his impression on Dr. Malinak who is looking forward to the fall when Ms. Forbes begins work at Nazareth. "I want to know how much and
exactly how she uses the puppet," Dr. Malinak says. "I've thought about it since I saw her class. The puppet was an effective teaching tool—not obtrusive. I would be interested in trying myself." Dr. Malinak will have his chance. Ms. Forbes plans to take Atila with her when she moves from Pennsylvania to New York. "We're sort of stuck together," she said.

Although Diane Forbes is not an old hand at using puppets, she talks like one. The first time she used a puppet in a classroom was during the summer of 1983 when she teaching an intensive Spanish course.

"I got the idea from a former graduate student colleague who had occasionally used a mustached puppet named "Salvadore" in her class. Although she admits she was not certain what to do with Salvadore, he introduced her to the communicative power of puppets.

"I was walking to class one morning a year later," she said, "thinking about an especially difficult lesson I had to teach that day. Then I thought, What about a puppet? I ran to the children's bookstore and found Atila." Ms. Forbes, who says she is always looking for different, nontraditional way to approach teaching, knew she had found a powerful aide in Atila the first time she used him.

Recalling the demonstration class she taught at Nazareth College, she said, "the puppet is a bridge" to reach her students. "I use him instead of myself; he's an informed model. And he knows what I'm talking about. That's important in a beginning foreign language class when you're the only person who really understand the language. Atila, " she adds, "gives me the chance to talk to and about somebody other than myself."

Despite Dr. Malinak's appraisal of her a "quite confident," Forbes readily admits that the first time she introduced Atila to her class last summer she was nervous "because I don't always know what I'm doing." Currently, she says she is somewhat limited in her use of the puppet. "It's an emerging process. I'm working on ways to use him more in a lesson, though I don't want to use Atila for everything. That would become too routine and ordinary. I want him to remain special, " she adds.

Basically, she explains, Atila is used to present foreign language lessons in the form of conversations, descriptions, narrations, situations, questions, answers, and commands. "I use Atila to introduce new vocabulary or a new grammar point in order to proceed with a series of questions and answers based on the introduction," Ms. Forbes says. "This means a movement from a passive reception to active participation on the part of the students. Active participation first occurs between students, relating the situation to their
own lives. The result is that the students grasp a grammar point or absorb new vocabulary without mediation of a traditional grammatical explanation."

Ms. Forbes explains that the students learn language "through experience and direct contact rather than by memorizing vocabulary lists and translations or doing individual grammar drills. Abstract words and verb tenses become more tangible when presented in a situation. There is direct transfer of the vocabulary or action and its meaning—no reverting to English. Using a puppet also takes some of the emphasis away from the teacher when the focus should be on the material and the student. Ms. Forbes stresses that while a new world is entered when a puppet is used, "merely using a puppet does not suffice; it must be used in conjunction with some sort of creative methodology. "The puppet, after all, " she says, "does not explain what the past perfect subjunctive is and how it is derived."

Among the grammar lessons Atila has helped with are these:

- Forms of the verb "to be:" first Atila describes the students, then they describe him.
- Clothes: Atila puts on various articles of clothing, then combines a narration of this action with verb tenses, descriptions, comparisons, verbs such as "to put on," "to wear," "to button," to unbutton," "to zip," etc
- Parts of the body: "This can be funny with Atila."
- Colors: "Describe Atila. What color is he?"
- Interaction with verbs: "to push," "to pull," "to hit," "to throw," "to catch," "to kiss," "to pinch," "to speak to," "to shout at," "to dance with," "to sing to."
- Situation Vocabulary: "What does Atila ask for in a restaurant?" "What does he like to eat?" "Whom does he take with him?" "What kind of wine does he like?"
- Atila is useful in presenting the verb "poder" (to be able to): "I cover his eyes and ask, "Can you see? 'No.' Uncover his eyes. 'Can you see now?' 'Yes.' 'Whom do you see?' 'I see Amelia.' · · I try to open the door or push the table, but can't because it's too heavy. I ask Atila, 'Can you help me?' 'Yes, I can help you.' And he follows through with the action to illustrate. This is continued with the main verb 'to be able to', and then the process is repeated with the students.
- To illustrate new verbs through commands: "to play the guitar," "to sing," "to drink wine from the bottle," "to draw a happy face on the board," "to speak French," "to speak Japanese," "to put on a said face," "to dance," "to speak as if you are drunk/ crazy/ angry." Ms. Forbes explains that these expressions could be illustrated by the
teacher for the students to figure out before performing them themselves, but that it's much more interesting to use Atila as the model.

- Visual gags: wrapping Atila's head and saying he has a toothache or blindfolding him and playing twenty questions.
- Props: Atila can be used with many props, especially when they have to do with the vocabulary of the lesson (hat, clothes, flowers, wine bottle, situations in the library, supermarket, post office, etc.)

Sometimes Atila makes comments spontaneously in the middle of a lesson when he isn't directly involved. This elicits response from the students and stimulates free conversation; not just set sentences within the particular lessons studied.

In analyzing her use of Atila, Forbes says, "I think using a puppet closely resembles 'humanistic education' in the sense that Gertrude Moskowitz uses the term in her book, Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Classroom. The students express their feelings about another 'being' present in the classroom, verbally and nonverbally and I think this in turn affects the way they feel about the language."

A lovely rapport developed between Atila and the students," Ms. Forbes says. "They even wanted me to take him to the parties we had. Once student in particular became very attached to Atila, and she would play with him during the breaks between class periods or hold him during class. The class picked up on this and started a playful rumor about the two of them, which provoked comments and reactions at times during the lessons."

A rapport has also developed between Ms. Forbes and Atila. "It was apparent from the beginning that Atila and I were very close," she says, "and he would always defend me when I needed it. If he and I ever get angry with each other we always make peace by the end of the lesson. Forbes doesn't leave Atila behind in the classroom, either. Her mind is always working for new ways to use him, which speaks for the medium's ability to stimulate creative teaching approaches.

"I never know what to do with my voice, for example, she says." "If I changed it and gave him a voice of his own, then the students would speak more directly to him. Once in a while they will get caught up in it all and will talk to him. I like it when that happens," she says. Her students do not feel the lack of confidence nor the inexperience which concern Ms. Forbes. Lisa Baker, a junior finance major who took the intensive Spanish class last summer says," Ms. Forbes class was relaxed to begin with. But Atila represented somebody who wasn't going to do anything bad to you."
Phil Stebbins, a professor of constitutional history at Penn State for 17 years, was also a student during the summer session. "There is lot of anxiety in learning a language," he says. "Anything that reduces that anxiety obviously helps. You have a desperate sense of not wanting to be embarrassed. The puppet distracted our attention from that worry. Dr. Stebbins adds, "There really was a strange sort of emotional bond between the puppet and students. The puppet became a symbol. He was the class mascot. Diane Forbes is a good teacher!"

Diane Forbes does not see that she is doing anything special. She is simply doing what she wants to do. "I really love using the puppet," she says, "not because I'm that good—I push to be better—but because I really enjoy my students. It's neat to see the lightbulb go on over their heads when they've realized something," she says.

Yet, despite her modesty, Ms. Forbes has heard from others that her classes have made a significant difference. "ultimately," she says, "I did something different and it works. I recently ran into a former student and asked her how her present Spanish class was going. 'It's so boring now," she said. 'You used to make it so much fun.' That made me feel good. "Students respect you for trying something unusual instead of just going down the rows, name by name," she explains. "You have to find ways to make what you teach concrete. You can do pattern drills and have the students parrot-back sentences. But if you hold an umbrella in front of a class, show it to them, then they know it's not just a word, it's a real object. Atila helps in that process."

In teaching a foreign language, Ms. Forbes admits that she meets a great deal of resistance from her students. "I'm fighting against all those years of 'oh, foreign language, yuck!' Some of them hate it so much. I have to struggle to make it enjoyable." She says she is "still searching" for her teaching style and other methods that work.

But it seems that Diane Forbes is well on her way to leaving her mark on her students. As Lisa Baker recalls from the first day Atila was introduced in the intensive Spanish class: "One day he just popped up. It was something new and different. It was very easy to think of Atila as an almost real thing. I had fun. And, she says, "I learned Spanish at the same time."

Postscript: We all know it's possible for puppets to talk right out there on the end of our hand, but we've been trained to think of puppets as needing a stage. Puppets no more need a stage to talk than you or I. Nor does the question of age-appropriateness matter. The puppet is a device that engages us in communicative play. It is a universal response. In discussing puppets,
we have removed ourselves from the topic of children's entertainment and are squarely in the realm of human communication and neurophysiology. "I'm still a little nervous about it," say Forbes, "but the students response propels me forward. There is a certain amount of strange mystique (who is this I am talking with?); like the girl who giggled bashfully when Atila asked if she wanted to go out with him, or the one who emphatically said 'yes' when asked if she'd invite him to her party, or the nervousness when he asked one girl to dance with him. They laugh at the silliness, but it's all in Spanish and they understand and respond; it's fun and it means something concrete to them...not just verb conjugations."

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