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Sock Puppets Complete

Title	Sock Puppets Complete
Developer	Smith Micro Software
Contact information	http://my.smithmicro.com/mobile/sockpuppets/
Link in iTunes Store	https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/sock-puppets-complete/id547666894?mt=8
Type of product	Mobile app for iPhone®, iPod® Touch, or iPad®. App demonstrated in this article using iPad 2 and iOS 7.
Minimum requirements	Requires iOS 4.3 or later. This app is optimized for iPhone 5.
Optional Hardware	External USB microphone with the Apple Camera Connection Kit for improved recording quality.
Price	$3.99 (a free, basic version is also available)

Introduction

Two of the perennial challenges facing language teachers are the issues of engaging students in meaningful speaking tasks and, at the same time, helping students see models of the desired language competencies at work so they can meet class objectives. Getting students to speak is not enough; they must be able to produce the desired outcomes accurately and appropriately.

First of all, getting students to open up can present some unique challenges, particularly when trying to address the diversity of cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and age groups in the language classroom. With this in mind, the use of different forms of drama and puppetry has been promoted as a tool to dismantle students' inhibitions, foster greater participation, and tap into different learning modalities and intelligences (Bernier & O'Hare, 2012; Plautz, Ebira, & Wilson, 2011; Simon, Naylor, Keogh, Maloney, & Downing, 2008; Salmon & Sainato, 2005). Unfortunately, from an instructional point of view, drama and puppetry are sometimes viewed as side activities divorced from core content. However, Fontichiaro (2007, p. xiii) stresses these engaging techniques can

serve "as a way of building on curriculum objectives—not as separate activities but as activities that contributed to students' understanding of core knowledge."

In addition to promoting engaging conversations, there exists the need to provide language learners with concise models of the language competencies that are required to accomplish specific tasks. In other words, if students need to introduce themselves to a partner using specific vocabulary, grammar, and socially-appropriate register and formality, then they would benefit greatly from being able to see a video of such discourse and then be taught how to evaluate their own production.

With these concepts in mind, having the ability to easily author such models with the use of puppets in a mobile application can certainly be a significant pedagogical boon to teachers and students.

Figure 1. *Sock Puppet's opening screen*

General product description

The overall objective of Sock Puppets is to allow users to create their own lip-synched productions on Apple mobile devices. Although there is a free version of the app, this review deals with Sock Puppets Complete, a commercial version of the software that extends recording time, allows for background image import, provides additional puppets, and allows users to save their productions to Photos on their device (important for sharing via different services including YouTube, Facebook, messaging, and email).

Information regarding these add-ons and the complete version can be reviewed in the free version when clicking on the in-app store link.

Once installed, the app is very easy to use. First of all, users can adjust the voice pitch of each puppet. You simply make a three-second recording of your voice within the app and, based on this sample, adjust or morph the tone for each of the puppet characters (see Figure 2). There is some tone distortion when you move the settings to the high and low ends, but the mid-ranges give you a lot of choices, especially in situations when you select two characters, and you will be the voice for both.

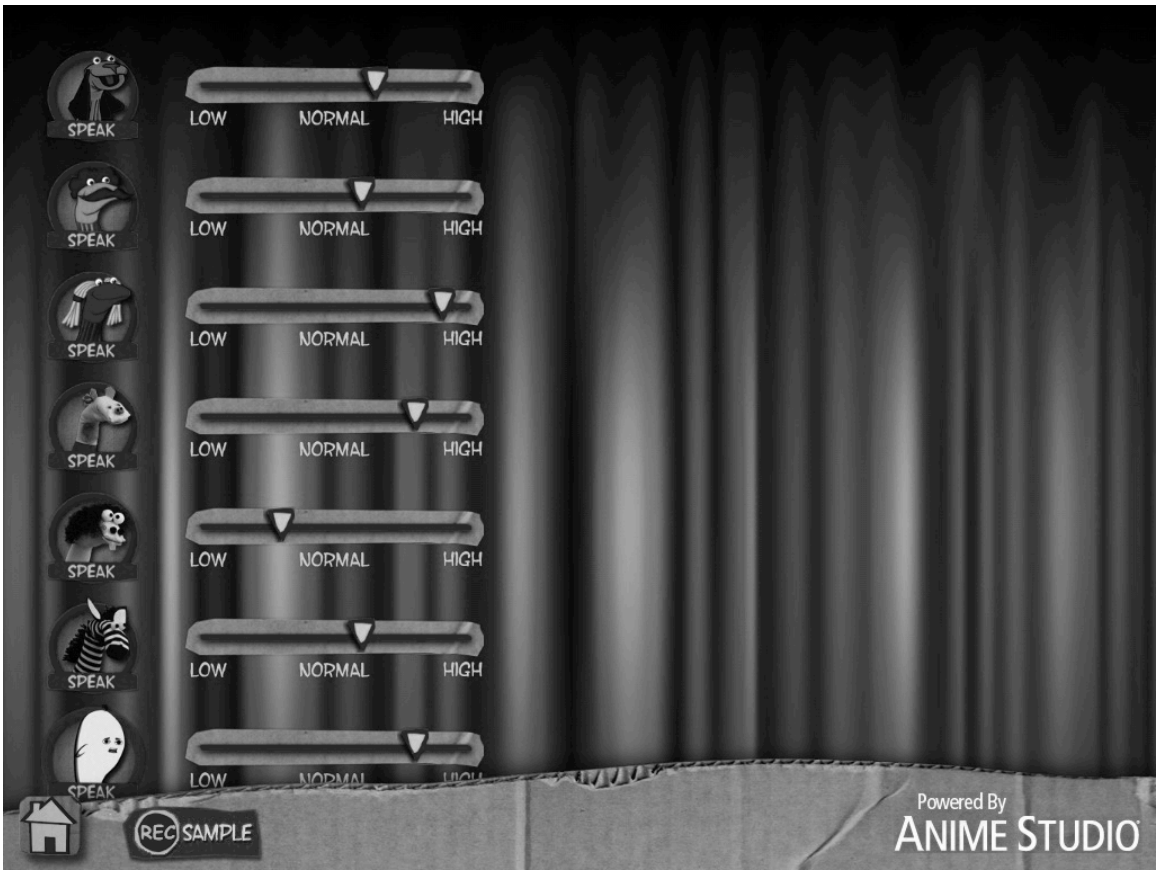

Figure 2. *Voice settings*

The next step is to select up to four puppet characters (see Figure 3) for your show by clicking on each corresponding puppet icon. You cannot create or import your own puppet creation (e.g., something you create in a separate graphics program), but there are a number of real and cartoon puppets to choose from to give variety to your show.

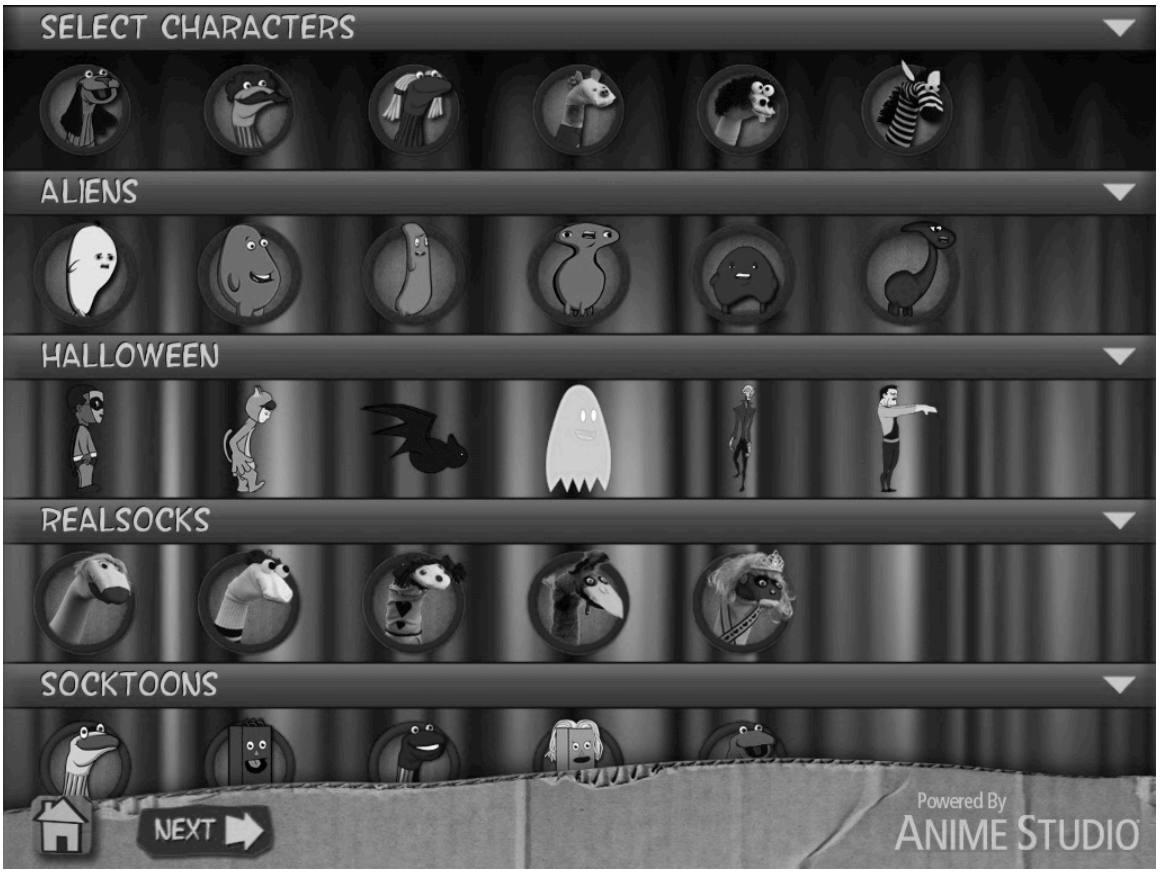

Figure 3. *Selecting characters*

Some of the greatest creative elements come in selecting backgrounds for your puppet show by simply clicking on a background icon (see Figure 4). The app provides a number of realistic and cartoon backdrops to choose from, but you can easily take pictures with an iPad or iPhone and import those into the app. Users can select up to five backgrounds for any puppet, so you can switch the stage from one location to another during your show. However, with only a 90-second recording time, most users will not switch the background that many times.

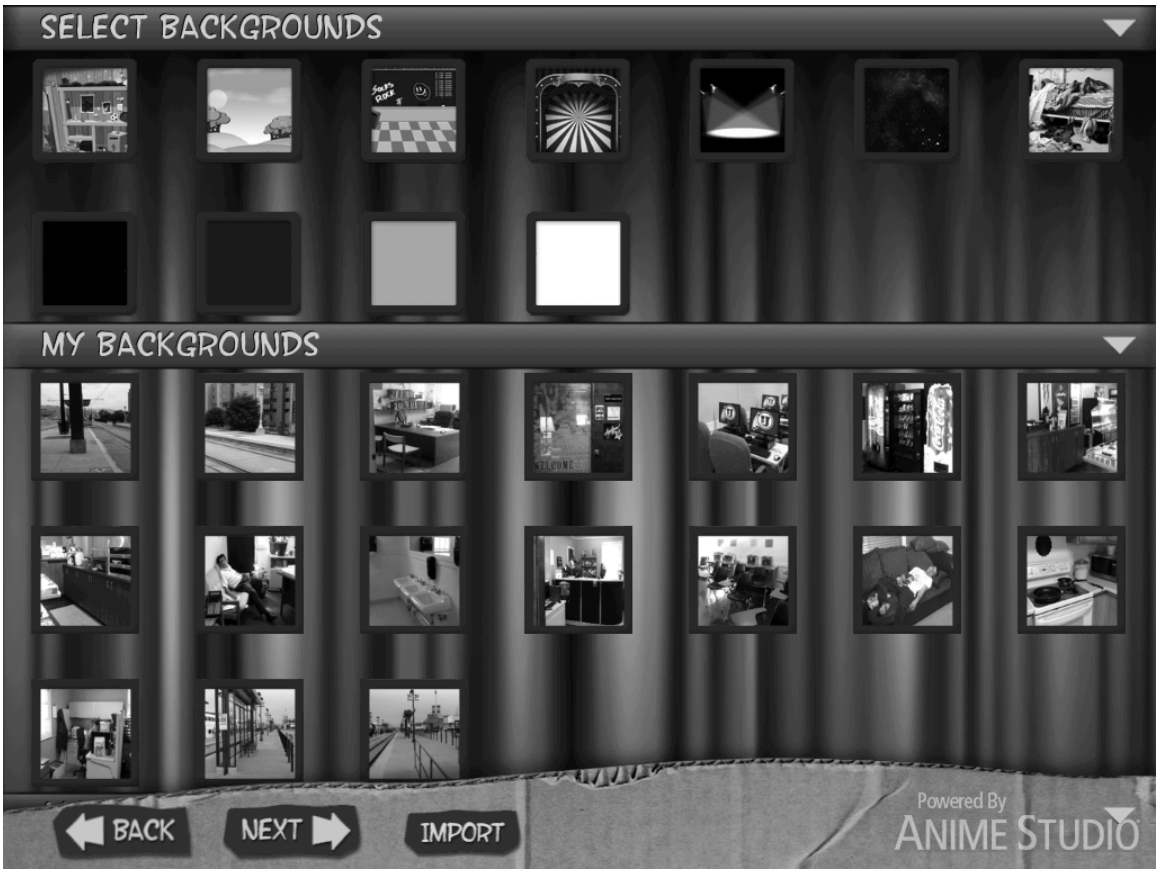

Figure 4. *Selecting backgrounds*

The next screen will take you to the actual stage where you see your selected characters and initial background (see Figure 5 of the author pretending to be asleep in his office as part of the show). Any additional backgrounds you chose previously will appear at the right of your screen as small screen icons. Just click on a different mini background icon to switch scenes any time during your show.

Figure 5. *Creating your production on the sock puppet stage*

The next steps demonstrate the simplicity of creating the puppet show. First, users choose which puppet they want to speak by clicking on it, indicated by a red arrow above the puppet (see Figure 5). This should be done before the Record button is clicked. Changing to a new puppet works the same way. A countdown clock is displayed near the top of the screen. During the puppet show, the characters' mouths move automatically in synch with your voice, and the puppets can easily be moved around on the screen by dragging them with your finger. Finally, the puppets can be resized in the same way.

In many cases, teachers and students can record the puppet show by using the device's internal microphone; however, users can achieve better sound quality by using an external microphone. One option (see Figure 6) is to combine the Apple Camera Connection Kit (a small adapter connecting the USB device to your device's dock connector port), the Blue Yeti USB microphone, and the iPad. Because the Blue Yeti requires additional power, it needs to be connected through a powered USB hub along with the Apple camera connection (seehttp://youtu.be/iG33ViwPnOE for a video demonstration and recommendations).

Figure 6. *Setting up an external mic with an iPad*

There are other USB microphones that will work without the powered USB hub. The Blue Yeti has four different pattern modes for recording, including the bi-directional mode, which records from both the front and back of the microphone making it optimal for productions with two people. In addition, the microphone is equipped with a headphone jack which can be used to monitor your recording levels in real time without any latency delays.

One final optional tool to eliminate pops and hisses (e.g., the aspirated /p/) from your recordings is to use a pop screen which is placed between you and your microphone. Pop screens are readily available from many online stores, but a simple version can be made with pantyhose and an embroidery hoop (see Figure 7).

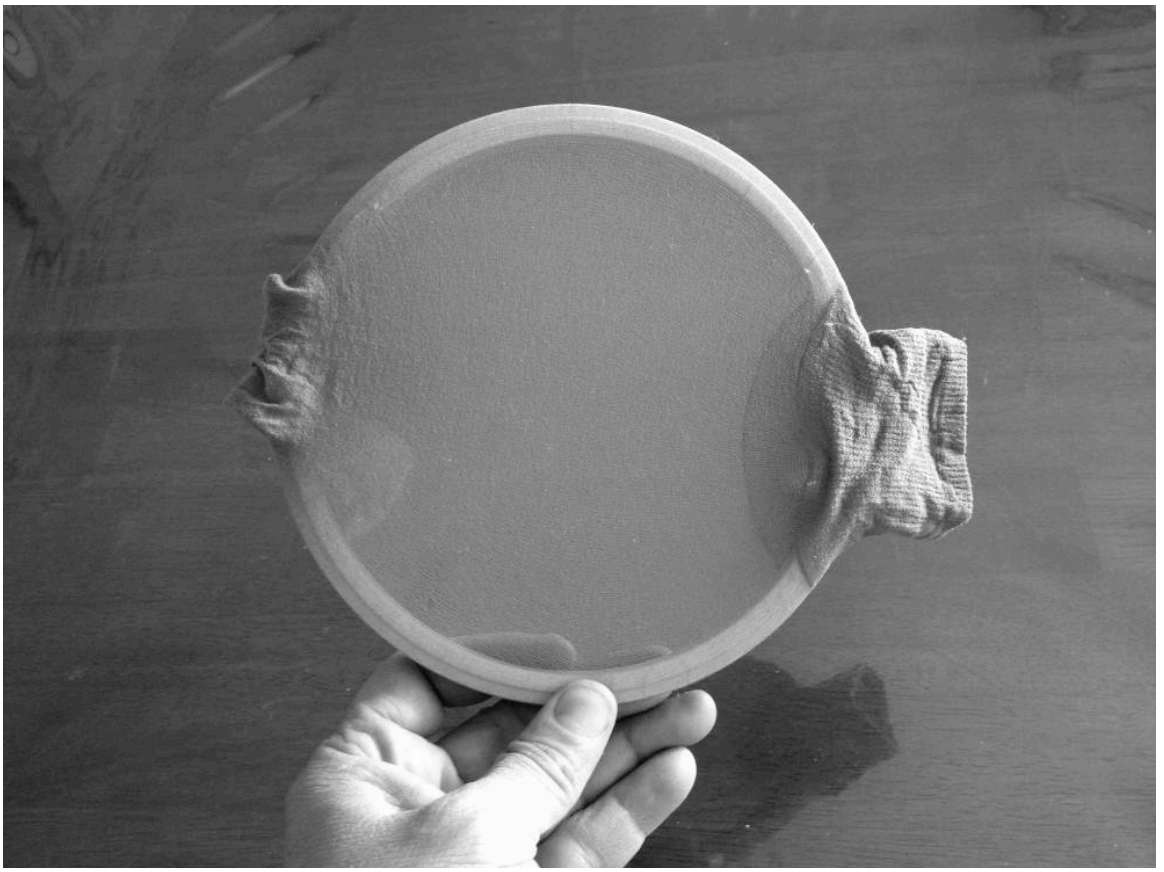

Figure 7. *Creating a homemade pop screen*

Sharing your puppet show

The Sock Puppets program has a number of features for sharing and adjusting the quality of the video export within the app. You access these features by clicking on the Share icon at the top of the production window (see Figure 8).

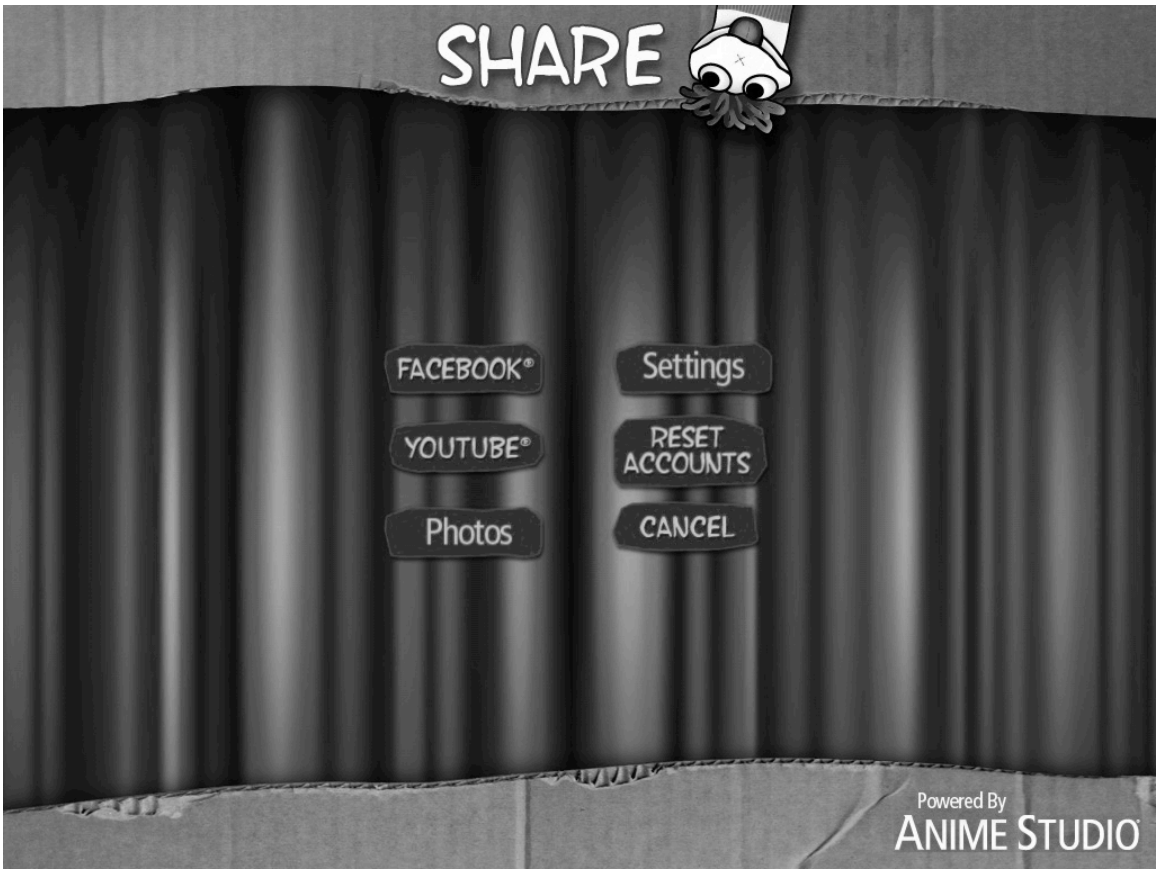

Figure 8. *Sharing puppet show directly from app*

Before exporting or sharing your video, Sock Puppets also allows you to determine the output quality and video screen size. In experimenting with this feature with a one minute video, the major noticeable difference was the video size when rendering and exporting the video to the camera roll on the iPad and then copying it to a desktop computer. The video rendered at the highest settings is 1024×768 versus 480×320 at the low end. The audio sampling and bit rate appear to be identical. The file sizes are 2.77MB and 1.34MB respectively, which are very manageable for sharing via text message or email.

Perhaps the greatest feature of the app is its ability to share videos to Facebook and YouTube, or to save to your Photos on your device for future review. There are two ways to accomplish this: a feature within the app itself and from the camera roll in Photos on your device. With the first method, keep in mind that direct uploading of videos within third-party apps such as Sock Puppets to YouTube requires you to make changes in your settings within a user's YouTube account. Unfortunately, there are no support materials or documentation on this topic within the app or on the Sock Puppet Web site, and, without making these changes in a YouTube account, your upload will not work. Learning how to adjust these settings can be a cumbersome and confusing process for many app users. In addition, even if users are able to upload videos, you still do not have the ability to customize the name or settings of the video (e.g., whether to make the

video private, unlisted, or public) unless you go back into the YouTube account afterwards and change them.

Fortunately, there is another option for sharing content instead of uploading it directly from within the app. In this case, save your puppet show to your Photos on your device and then select it (see Figure 9). Tap on the share icon found on the bottom left corner of your screen (it looks like a box with an arrow coming out of the top). From here, users have a number of choices to save and share their productions. Perhaps the most useful option involves uploading the video to YouTube so classmates have access to and may review the content. Simply enter your YouTube log in information, give the video a title and description, and select the privacy setting for the video (see Figure 10).

Figure 9. *Sharing puppet show via Camera Roll in Photos*

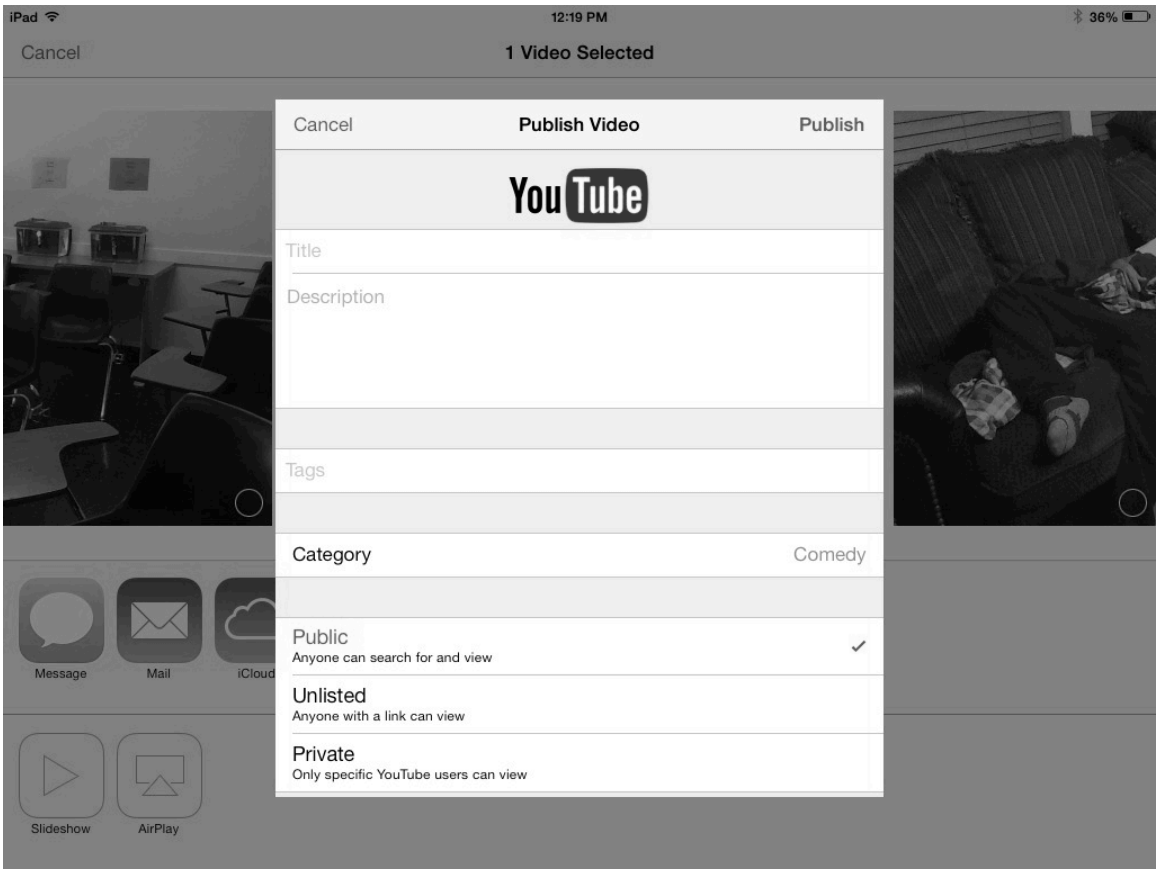

Figure 10. *Uploading to YouTube from the Camera Roll*

Evaluation and pedagogical applications

Although Sock Puppets is not specifically designed for language teaching and learning, there are inherent benefits of using the app for just that. Specifically, the app can be used to create models of the target language structures and then engage students in similar conversations that can be shared online.

To visualize these tasks at work, here are some instructional ideas on how to blend the app with classroom activities.

Creating speaking models:

1. Define the target language structures (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, feedback expressions, socio-linguistic features, dynamics) that will appear in the puppet show.
2. Prepare a clear, measurable scoring rubric for students to use. Avoid scales from 1 to 10. Most teachers cannot distinguish between a 6 and a 7, and neither can students. Just devise a simple scale such as Met or Not Met or 1 and 0.
3. Prepare a conversation with up to four speakers based on what students are learning in class.
4. Set up your "recording studio" in a quiet room with any external microphone you decide to use. A place with carpet, curtains, and bookshelves (rather than a square regular classroom) can minimize echoes and reverberations from your voices.

5. Select the puppets, the background(s), and any props. Consider personalizing the puppet show by importing backgrounds that are familiar to your students (e.g., a classroom at the school, a nearby train station, a park on campus).
6. Record the conversation, which needs to be less than 90 seconds. Save it.
7. Share it with students on YouTube. Students can also be given the script to the conversation.
8. Have students watch the video, and as needed, practice with a partner.

Optional:

1. Create a puppet show that models a number of common mistakes students make. This allows students to use the teacher-generated rubric to identify and correct problems in the video and helps them reflect on their own problems.

Student activities: (Groups of two or three students are ideal.)

1. Write short conversations based on topics studied in class.
2. Check the conversations with a teacher for accuracy.
3. Practice the conversation without the app. Encourage students to "get into" their roles. Focus on expressiveness and dynamics.
4. Follow steps 4-7 above.

Conclusion

In the field of language education, teachers are constantly trying to figure out how to make the best use of different technologies to facilitate instruction and assessment. Unfortunately, there are times when the device or software goes way beyond their needs and technical expertise. However, every so often, a simple application comes along that has the potential to help teachers and students view learning in new ways. Sock Puppets happens to be such an app. Not only is it easy and fun to use, it also provides opportunities for low-budget content creation that encourages greater student participation and greater student awareness of the language skills they need. In addition, the app's functionality with other online services such as YouTube helps make classroom instruction more mobile in exciting new ways.

References

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About the Reviewer

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