Nursery rhymes as a vehicle for teaching English as a foreign language

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Abstract: In this paper, the authors present a rationale and offer suggestions for how nursery rhymes could be used in the EFL classroom as well as how teachers and/or teachers in training might use nursery rhymes to enhance engagement in learning English. First, the authors define nursery rhymes, give a brief history of the origins, discuss the characteristics, make a case for using nursery rhymes with EFL learners, and last, offer practical suggestions for how nursery rhymes might be used in English as a Foreign (EFL) instruction. A list of accessible nursery rhyme resources is shared at the end. There are many categories in folklore, but the ones children often like the most and adults may remember well are nursery rhymes, fairy tales, fables, myths, legends, and folksongs. Each of these genres contributes in some way to the language development of children. Nursery rhymes in particular form one of the foundations of children’s as well as adults’ literary heritage. The simple rhythm and rhyme of the language, the often predictable structure of the narratives, and the appealing characters combine to produce memorable language models for young children (Cullinan & Galda, 1998; Temple, Martinez, & Yakota, 2011). Children delight in the opportunities to chant the catchy phrases, mimic the nonsense words, and recite the lines endlessly. This pleasure in nursery rhymes translates into developing many reading, writing and oral language skills such as naturally segmenting sounds in spoken words and playing with real and nonsense words. Additionally, young children appreciate the stories and verses for their rhythm, repetition, and rhyme. Their attention is focused on the fanciful language and imaginative nonsense. They learn basic story patterns, encounter vivid plots, develop a sense of theme, and meet intriguing characters that in turn become the stepping stones for subsequent literary education (Cullinan & Galda, 1998; Bodden, 2010).

Keywords: Nursery Rhymes, Teaching English, EFL, Young Learners, Rhyme, Rhythm

1. Definition and Types of Nursery Rhymes

A nursery rhyme can be defined as a short poem or song for children, usually composed by an anonymous poet; these verses are “highly rhythmic, tightly rhymed, and popular with small children” (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2011, p. 171). Considered traditional poems for young children in Britain and many other countries, their usage dates from the 19th century and in North America the older “Mother Goose Rhymes” are still often used in primary classrooms. Betsy Hearne (as cited in Norton, 2011) emphasizes the appeal of these rhymes and notes that “Nursery Rhymes are only a step away from song in their changing cadence and compressed story elements” (p.160). Whereas lullabies are considered sleep songs, nursery rhymes are waking songs; they are engaging verses for an adult to sing to or chant with children. Many of these anonymous verses, with their rich oral tradition, have traveled from generation to generation and one can often find the echoes of these poems in collections by later poets (Zipes, et al., 2005, p. 1138).

2. Historical Background

Poems have been composed for thousands of years. In the past, when people intended to tell a tale, they made it into a poem, because of the power poems have on readers. They can help readers see and mentally explore things in a new way. They can make readers feel strong emotions manifested through crying or laughing, sighing or screaming (Bodden, 2010, p. 3). One of the goals of silly verses known as nursery
rhymes is to entertain young children and soothe babies. It is believed that the earliest nursery rhymes were created before the 1600s. The first rhymes belong to the oral tradition; they were passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. Many nursery rhymes, however, were not originally created for children. Instead, some came from parts of adult songs, while others originated from the catchy calls of street peddlers. Some even originated from old religious traditions. Over time, nursery rhymes became part of the daily lives of children; they recited those rhymes at home, in school, and at play in the streets.

In the beginning of the 1700s a few of the rhymes were published in England as A Little Book for Little Children; it contained a number of nursery rhymes that are still recognized today, for example, “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Baa, baa, black sheep, Have you any wool?} \\
\text{Yes, sir, yes, sir: Three bags full.} \\
\text{One for the master, and one for the dame,} \\
\text{And one for the little boy who lives down the lane.}
\end{align*}
\]

This traditional nursery rhyme is thought to date from feudal times, when peasants and vassals paid shares of their products to the powerful land lords and their family who owned the lands of England.

Other nursery rhymes are thought to have a rich historical background and “hidden” messages. Consider the following verse; it is thought to refer to the Black Death, or the Plague, which killed about twenty-five percent of the population of England in the fourteenth century:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ring around the roses,} \\
\text{Pocket full of posies,} \\
\text{Ashes, ashes,} \\
\text{We all fall down.}
\end{align*}
\]

The ring around the roses refers to the rash of an infected person; the pocket full of posies refers to the alleged protection flowers offered against polluted air which was believed to spread the sickness; and the ashes and falling down refer to the sudden dramatic death of plague-stricken people whose bodies were piled up and burned (Temple, et.al., 2011, p. 171). During 1765-1780 a collection of rhymes called Mother Goose’s Melody was published in England by John Newbery. It witnessed an instant success and copies were soon being sold throughout England and in America. Although writing new nursery rhymes is not common, today the old ones continue to be recited again and again by children and teachers around the world (Bodden, 2011, p. 9).

3. Appealing Characteristics

Nursery rhymes take no consistent form. Some are short, with four or fewer lines. Others are long and contain many verses. Most nursery rhymes are musical, with a strong sense of rhyme and rhythm. These characteristics make nursery rhymes easy and delightful to remember (Bodden, 2011). Some nursery rhymes follow the scheme of using couplets—the last words of the first two lines rhyme; the last words of the last two lines rhyme—or use the a a b b rhyme structure. This type of rhyme scheme is presented in the following example:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Little bird of paradise,} \\
\text{She works her work both neat and nice;} \\
\text{He bought some at a grocer’s shop} \\
\text{And out he came, hop, hop, hop.}
\end{align*}
\]

Gould and Gould:272

Along with the amusing rhyme this sort of poetry has, it usually has a strong sense of rhythm. The rhythm of nursery rhymes is often like the beat of drums. This beat keeps the poem active and moving forward. As with most verse, the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables of a nursery rhyme determines the rhythm. According to Bodden (2010), “Nursery rhymes usually do not follow a specific rhythm. Reading them out loud can help one identify its rhythm. In fact, since nursery rhymes were originally passed along orally, they are usually meant to be heard rather than simply seen on a page (p. 15).

The rhythm in many nursery rhymes invites listeners to react immediately. They may, for example, clap their hands or jump up and down to the music of lines such as these:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Handy dandy, Jack-a-Dandy} \\
\text{Loves plum cake and sugar candy;} \\
\text{He fell down and broke his crown,} \\
\text{And Jill came tumbling after.}
\end{align*}
\]

(1)

The rhyming words dandy and candy, and shop and hop, engage listeners or readers to join in and play with or use these rhyming words to make their own rhymes. A child may also respond to the repetition of sounds in a phrase or line of a nursery rhyme by saying them over and over (Norton, 2011).

The imaginative use of words and ideas is another characteristic of nursery rhymes. Children enjoy the images depicted by the following lines of verse:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Jack and Jill went up the hill} \\
\text{To fetch a pail of water;} \\
\text{Jack fell down and broke his crown,} \\
\text{And Jill came tumbling after.}
\end{align*}
\]

It is easy to envision a girl and a boy climbing a hill, bucket in hand, ready to draw water from the well when a trip and fall ends the mundane task.

Nursery rhymes tend to have a compact structure. The setting in nursery rhymes is established very quickly and the plot of the story the rhyme tells is disclosed immediately without limited but clear details. Characters are easily identified. In ten short lines one can hear the entire story of the nursery rhyme:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ding, dong, bell,} \\
\text{Pussy’s in the well.}
\end{align*}
\]
story of a man who sat on a wall and who fell down and broke into pieces and no one could help him. Yet, as a nursery rhyme, “Humpty Dumpty” has been children’s favorite for generations. The silliness of the rhyme and nonsense language often doesn’t matter for young children; the melody and rhythm are the focal points. Nursery rhymes have a lot more to offer than just entertainment value. These rhymes introduce children to the idea of narrative, promote social skills, enhance language development, and lay the basis for learning to read and spell.

5. Practical Applications

Listening to and reciting nursery rhymes enhances early reading skills and phonemic awareness which is said to predict a child’s reading success. Yet any age EFL learner can benefit from using nursery rhymes to develop or improve English pronunciations, word play, and more. Whether teaching young children or older learners, nursery rhymes have a place in learning or acquiring English language skills. Here are some ideas to try with your class.

First, teachers should be willing to read aloud a variety of nursery rhymes—not just once—but many times. The beginning for all language learning is oral. Hearing and joining in with the teacher’s voice is a critical component for learning to read and write and an important starting point for helping students use the cadence, structure, and intonations of Standard English.

Pocket charts have a place in any classroom for playing with language. Teachers or their students can write nursery rhymes on paper strips assemble with readers as a group or have individuals come up and read and put their strip in the right line in the pocket chart. Students can practice reading the pocket chart strips in their correct order. Once readers are fairly fluent, have them reorganize the order and try reading each line and see how it sounds. Reassemble again correctly, with student help. Make sure students read the line before placing or replacing it in the pocket chart.

Readers’ theatre can be used for beginning child or adult EFL readers. Choose one or two popular nursery rhymes, make sure everyone has a copy of the poem, practice fluent reading with appropriate intonation, expression and pacing until each group can perform for an audience of peers or others. The power of readers’ theater is that readers of all stages can work together to create an enjoyable performance for others while practicing the lines. Video or audio-tapes can be made so that performers can listen to and evaluate their performance.

Learners can choose a nursery rhyme they would like to memorize and practice saying it or reading it until fluent, then share in small groups or with the whole class.

Older students who can read and write in their heritage language can translate a nursery rhyme from their language to English, alone or in small teams, ensuring that the poem rhymes appropriately. Conversely, students can translate an English nursery rhyme into the heritage language and share it

4. Teaching Nursery Rhymes

A parent might not feel comfortable to read to their child a
with other students (can work in teams or alone).

Another idea is to explore the political history of one of the English nursery rhymes and make a poster where an explanation is written for each line (or the explanation is written in a paragraph below the nursery rhyme).

Students can also put physical actions to the nursery rhyme as someone reads it aloud. Give different nursery rhymes to small groups and have them practice reading the poem and acting it out. Share with the rest of the group.

In small groups or alone, students can compose a nursery rhyme adventure using the characters such as Humpty Dumpty or Jack Sprat and rewrite the rhyme or make up your own nursery rhyme to write, read and practice, then read aloud to others.

Nursery rhymes can be one part of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to adult learners. Since nursery rhymes are such a fundamental part of exploring English and they occur in many other languages and cultures, they are a natural vehicle for engaging learners of English, no matter their language or cultural background. Nursery rhymes can help older learners develop cultural appreciation as well as an enjoyable way to practice with the new language.

This form of light verse can assist older students and adults to learn English. This kind of redundancy in language is also what assists older learners of English to access the new language.

In addition to the supportive concepts of rhyme, rhythm and song-like attributes nursery rhymes offer young learners, older English language learners can also benefit from these supports. Some nursery rhymes have a long tradition of political meanings, which can make them more interesting for adult learners. This meaningful history may help learners of English language appreciate the value of learning and using nursery rhymes in speaking, reading and writing.

References


