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Nursery Rhymes and Language Learning: Issues and Pedagogical Implications

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ABSTRACT

The present study was an attempt to account for the effectiveness of nursery rhymes on the language learners' improvement in learning language skills and sub-skills. In fact, the purpose was to bold the undeniable role of nursery rhymes in education. Reviewing the literature regarding the significance of singing in chorus for pedagogical purposes can broaden our understanding of the practicality and applicability of nursery rhymes in the interactive atmosphere of the classroom, particularly for young learners who are a lot concerned with singing together. The role of employing nursery rhymes in the language learning process has thoroughly been recognized since it helps teachers to put the learners in a motivating learning environment and simultaneously encouraging them to have more interaction while listening to the song and subsequently sharing their thoughts by the helps of their peers as well as the teacher. Awareness-raising activities should be carried out by the teacher education program held by expert educators to provide necessary and sufficient information regarding practical application of nursery rhymes in the language classroom to be beneficial for both teacher and learners.

Keywords: *Nursery Rhymes, Language Learning, Teaching Language Skills, Second Language Acquisition, Listening*

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1. Introduction

Teaching and learning main language skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) appears to have always been concerned by researchers in the field of second or foreign language acquisition for language learners in the past decades (LeLoup & Pontiero, 2007). Language learners are willing to understand target language (L2) speakers and like to be able to access aural and visual L2 texts via network based multimedia, such as on-line audio and video, YouTube, podcasts and blogs. Furthermore, language skill, such as listening comprehension plays an important role in L2 learning since the development of L2 listening skills has been proved to pave the way for efficient development of other skills (Dunkel, 1991; Rost, 2002). Clearly, it is important to develop L2 listening competence for young language learners since it is often perceived by young language learners as difficult language skill to learn since it is largely concerned with

their recognition of sounds (Hasan, 2000; Graham, 2003).

Auditory perception is part of the learning process that can be at the service of learning how to listen or other language skills, such as speaking. To listen efficiently, children must be able to discern among the different sounds they may hear (Blondel, & Miller, 2001). Bodden (2010) suggested that in order for children to comprehend what they hear depends on an understanding of what exactly a word is or probably what it functions. He further claimed that one of the ways that children can have better understanding is by adults' reading. Reading aloud can help children learn different sounds and also makes them familiar with graphic symbols of language and probably gives them the approximate knowledge that the words on a page have meaning. Specifically, it helps children make the link between speech and listening while encouraging them to have more peer interaction in the listening classroom



(Bryant, Bradley, MacLean, & Crossland, 1989).

Gauthier and Lejeune (2008) agreed that learning how to listen is in direct relationship with language learning. In fact, if young language learners are provided with appropriate listening instruction, they may not face critical problems regarding their listening in the future. They also explained that children's language is exposed to daily interaction with others, but it can develop individually, usually between the ages of six and seven. When children have peer interaction, they are in the process of distinguishing sounds by involving their mental processes and try to practice them. It is by whispering, singing, talking, and shouting that they can produce a variety of the words with different sounds. In this process children express rhythmic sequences, repeat words and sentences and listen to the sounds. According to Lo and Fai Li (1998), rhyming patterns seem to be motivating for young language learners as they highlight sound patterns which are different from ordinary speech.

Not only do children enjoy telling their own rhyming patterns, they also enjoy listening to nursery rhymes. As described by York (2011), nursery rhymes are simple poetry in nature written in a particular with specific language that young children can learn and enjoy. As reported by York most nursery rhymes can be divided into several lines with special beats each. In fact, beats help the children to have a better attention to the lines and then produce the rhymes.

Dodson (1981) described nursery rhymes as, "sentences set to music" (p. 37) and believed that the rhythm and rhymes are so appealing to young children, helping them to improve their listening skill. Nursery rhymes also make them easier to learn and to remember than prose. He further noted that nursery rhymes are written use of language that young children can understand their words and are short enough to keep their attention while listening.

Since nursery rhymes have been found to encourage young language learners' ability improve their language skills and probably sub-skills, the present study aimed at descriptively maneuver on the significance of benefiting from nursery rhymes in paving the way for language learners, particularly young ones who are mainly concerned with nursery rhymes, to gain mastery over language learning since they can be involved in real-life

interactional learning environment, and it is through listening to the rhymes that they can face improvement in the language learning.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Nursery Rhymes in Language Education

Most children are interested in singing songs, and they can positively change their routine form of learning a foreign language through rhythmic sounds for educational purposes. For the teacher, it seems that using songs in the classroom can be a nice break which can be accommodated in the curriculum (Blondel & Miller, 2011). Songs can be taught to students of different proficiency levels and even those teachers who have limited resources can use them effectively (Bodden, 2010). Bodden argues that songs play an important role in language development and can pave the way for young children to engage in more cooperative learning a second language in a rather motivating learning setting. It is also noteworthy that applying songs may be used ineffectively and the potential for language learning is not maximized, which shows that cautious should be made concerning the selection of the songs and how they should be implemented in the learning process.

One advantage of using songs in the young learner classroom lies in their flexibility. Songs can be used for a number of purposes and there exist many reasons regarding the educational and pedagogical values of songs. They can help young learners improve their listening skills as well as pronunciation, therefore potentially making them ready to improve their speaking skills (Murphey, 1992). Songs, as Murphey argued, can also be useful tools in vocabulary learning, sentence structures, and sentence patterns. Perhaps the greatest benefit of songs in the classroom is that they can be of fun activity for the learners, which may potentially encourage them to have more interaction with their peers. In fact, pleasure for its own sake is an integral part of learning a language, which is often overlooked by teachers. In other words, songs can reinforce the sense of interest to the classroom routine and practically improve students' motivation (York, 2011).

Moriya (1988) emphasizes the pedagogical value of songs for pronunciation practice with Asian young language learners of English due to the phonemic differences between Asian

languages and English. For example, there are several problematic areas for Japanese students learning English. Similarly, Orlova (2003) shows the differences in vowels, consonants, and syllable types which create difficulties for foreign learners of English. Practicing the different sounds by singing songs can be of more interest and enjoyment rather than other activities such as minimal-pair drills, which might be tedious for the learners.

Songs can also provide the opportunity for vocabulary practice as well. They are usually designed in way that a theme or topic is selected that can provide the context for vocabulary learning (Peterson, 2000). The song *Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes*, for example, could be used to review body parts, or the song *I Can Sing a Rainbow* might be useful for reviewing color names. Most children's songs are distinguished by monosyllabic words, many of which are frequently repeated. This repetition suggests greater exposure to these words and can lead to improving the development of specific vocabulary suited for young language learners.

Some of the vocabulary and language used in traditional and popular English songs, however, can bring about difficulties for language learners due to their use of low frequency and archaic words. The song and the lyrics need to be selected carefully to be practically applied at the service of vocabulary learning. A difficulty for teachers is finding and selecting songs that are suitable in terms of vocabulary and topic or theme as well as the learners' proficiency levels.

Poems have been existed 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 or particular audience. In terms of educational purposes, poems 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). One of the goals of funny 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 built for children. Instead, some came from parts of adult songs, while others originated from

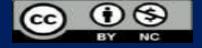
the catchy calls of street peddlers. Some even originated from old religious traditions. Over time, nursery rhymes became part of the daily lives of children; they recited those rhymes at home, in school, and at play in the streets.

Peterson (2000) reported a study where children were exposed to a curriculum emphasizing music instruction to get mastery over language and mathematics. Results showed that students in the music instruction group improved in language and reading. Learning to listen for changes in pitch in music may promote the ability to sound out new words. Therefore, there seems to be a correlation between language and music reading abilities.

Other research concerning the application of music in facilitating learning is found in Mohanty and Hejmadi (1992) who investigated the learners' ability to learn the names of body parts and creativity in three different conditions; verbal instruction only, verbal instruction with the addition of music, and non-training group. After treatment, all experimental groups showed higher test scores than the control group with the greatest improvement in learning for the group who received the instruction verbally with the addition of music. Thus, improvement in cognitive abilities can result from a variety of training experiences; however, empirical evidence suggests that music is one of the most effective of these treatments.

2.2 Nursery Rhymes and the Learners' Mind

The anatomic structure of the brain and its functions can offer evidence of why music can be beneficial to learning. The left hemisphere of the brain expresses thoughts in words, while the right hemisphere of the brain controls actions, problem resolution, memory, and emotions. Most learners use the right hemisphere of the brain to process music, and since most instruction relies heavily on left-brain approaches, music opens an opportunity to learners who have a strong right brain orientation (Borchgrevink, 1982). As Guglielmino (1986) stated, "songs bridge the brain's hemispheres, strengthening retention through a complementary function as the right hemisphere learns the melody, the left, the words" (p. 20). Anton (1990) found that "when a learning activity combines both left and right hemispheres simultaneously engaged in a particular activity, an ideal learning situation is established and the most productive learning occurs" (p. 1170). This ideal learning situation facilitates



flexible thinking and helps to explore new ways of expressing ideas. This would seem to indicate that music possesses an invaluable key to incorporate the whole brain in the learning process. This theory may provide principles to design more effective learning experiences. By using a variety of input methods including music, there may be more learning opportunities for students to connect to their present knowledge and add new knowledge. Music not only helps to store bits of information, but it is used as a mean by which the brain releases that same information for use.

The manner in which the nursery rhyme knowledge and experiences of young children with disabilities were related to the early communication, language, and literacy development of these children has been the recent decade interest (York, 2011). In a previous research synthesis of nursery rhyme knowledge and experiences of mostly young children without developmental disabilities or delays, variations in the nursery rhyme measures were related to variations in six different types of early and emergent literacy outcomes (Dunst & Garman 2011). The average effect sizes (correlations) for the relationships between the nursery rhyme and study outcomes ranged between 0.34 and 0.43 for phonological awareness outcome measures and ranged between 0.17 and 0.45 for print-related outcome measures.

Nursery rhymes were investigated in terms of either nursery rhyme knowledge or different kinds of nursery rhyme experiences. Nursery rhyme knowledge was measured in terms of the children's ability to recite popular and familiar rhymes (Maclean, Bryant, & Bradley, 1987). Nursery rhyme experiences were measured in terms of either the children's exposure to nursery rhymes or engagement in rhyming games or songs (e.g. Peeters, Verhoeven, van Balkom, & de Moor, 2009) or their choice/preference for listening to nursery rhymes compared to non-rhyming sounds or voices (e.g. Glenn & Cunningham, 1982).

2.3 Nursery Rhymes and Language Learning

There is strong practical evidence supporting the use of songs in the English language classroom (Schon, Boyer, Moreno, Besson, Peretz, & Kolinsky 2008; Wallace, 1994). There is also a growing body of research confirming that songs are

a useful tool in SLA (Wallace, 1994; York, 2011).

According to Ratnasari (2007), songs are a kind of art work which intend to be sung either with or without instrumental accompaniments. The free encyclopedia defines songs as a piece of music for accompanied or unaccompanied voice or voices. As for nursery rhymes, they are short and simple rhyming verses, songs or stories which are usually designed, told or sung for little children (Schon et al. 2008).

The casual nature of learning through singing can help promote a productive atmosphere in the class, lowering the affective filter and, in turn, increasing the potential for language acquisition (York, 2011). Moreover, there is one more advantage why teachers introduce songs in the classroom, according to Papa and Lantorno (1989), claiming that "singing is certainly one of the activities which generates the greatest enthusiasm and is a pleasant and stimulating approach to the culture of foreign people" (p. 8).

The L2 learners may feel more fluent singing along to song lyrics than they do speaking an L2, so this builds confidence. Also, a range of colloquial language can easily be introduced through songs. Finally, most lyrics need to be interpreted, and regular practice of this may improve prediction and comprehension skills.

Applying conventional techniques in teaching the English language such as explaining and drilling are unattractive and can be very dull for the L2 learners. Generally, L2 teachers in Iran like any other countries are seeking ways to improve the L2 learners' level of proficiency and accuracy in English (Ghanbari & Hashemian, 2014). So, the question for many L2 teachers is how to encourage L2 learners to continue learning and using English once the examinations are over.

An area of basic research in L2 learning is the identification and description of learning strategies used by the L2 learners and the correlation of these strategies with other learner variables such as proficiency level, age, gender, motivation, and the like (Ratnasari, 2007; York, 2011).

For the last two decades, L2 methodology has been actively involved in supporting the merging of using music and songs in class (Orlova, 2003). Some researchers (Eken, 1996; Graham, 1994) further support that music, songs and chants

are put to use in class based on methodological purposes.

Lo and Fai Li (1998) say that songs play an important role in motivating the L2 learners to learn English. They can support the development of L2 learners' skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking, as well as provide opportunities for learning pronunciation, rhythm, grammar and vocabulary. Besides, songs often offer variety and change from routine, repetitive classroom activities to a fun and lively atmosphere in class, as York (2011) exhibits that songs can create a relaxing, entertaining and non-threatening classroom atmosphere and L2 learners will be more open to learning in this regard.

To sum up, the literature has recognized the role of nursery rhymes in paving the way for the learners, particularly young ones, in developing their language learning skills. Listening instruction through nursery rhymes can be of great help for young language learners, particularly in foreign language contexts since English learning is of extreme enthusiasm for the parents and their children, particularly from the beginning of their education.

3. Conclusion

The present study was to highlight the role of nursery rhymes in facilitating the language learning in a rather different way, particularly for young language learners. In fact, through nursery rhymes learners are exposed to listening instruction and listening is applied as tool to foster communication, resulting in teaching other language skills and sub-skills, such as speaking and vocabulary. As to the benefits of nursery rhymes in language learning, the following contributions can be produced:

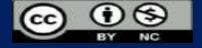
1. It is beneficial for teachers to be aware of using nursery rhymes in teaching language skills effectively and practically by involving the learners in the context of interaction.
2. Literature suggests an effective method for comprehensive program of language instruction in young language learners particularly at elementary level. Using nursery rhymes in teaching language skills can be adopted to other ages and proficiency levels, and to other second or foreign language setting as well.
3. As to the pedagogical value of nursery rhymes, it can be applied as a motivating factor in teaching language skills and sub-skills since it brings about a dynamic learning environment through which learners can enthusiastically benefit from peer interaction in chorus while the teacher

monitors their interaction and acts as a mediator in the teaching process.

4. Finally, teacher education can also take important measures regarding raising the teachers' awareness of using nursery rhymes in their classroom to improve the quality of teaching language skills and sub-skills, such as listening or vocabulary.

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