

# Nursery Rhymes as an Effective Instructional Material for Young Language Learners

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## Definition of Nursery Rhymes

There is a certain age at which a child looks at you in all earnestness and delivers a long, pleased speech with all the true inflections of spoken English, but with not one recognizable syllable. There is no way you can tell the child that if language had been a melody, he had mastered it and done well, but that since it was in fact a sense, he had botched it utterly. (Dillard, 1988, 106)

The gentle tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* brings back nostalgic feelings even for adults. Nursery Rhymes are often defined as “A short, rhymed poem or tale for children”, and are considered as traditional songs for young children in Britain and many other English speaking countries. Though the tradition of nursery rhymes as a primary source for teaching English language to children began as early as in the seventeenth century, its influence upon English language teaching remains pivotal.

## Teaching Methods and Nursery Rhymes

Throughout the twentieth century, History of English language teaching saw the rise and fall of a variety of language teaching methods. Changes in approach and methods of teaching English have been an outcome of a transition of ideas as to the kind of proficiency the learners need. Hence, the reformers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century differentiated between the methods of teaching language based on the objectives of language teaching, theory of language, theory of language learning, syllabus, Role of teachers, learner roles and the role of instructional material. Any method used in a language teaching class must also ensure proper selection of instructional material, to help the young learner achieve the kind of proficiency aimed at.

Language acquisition occurs when comprehension of real messages occurs, and when the acquirer is not 'on the defensive'... Language acquisition does

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not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. It does not occur overnight, however. Real language acquisition develops slowly, and speaking skills emerge significantly later than listening skills, even when conditions are perfect. The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production.” (Krashen, 1981, 202)

### **Importance of Interaction in Language Learning**

David Vale in his book *Teaching Children English*, stresses the importance of interaction and activity-based approaches within the language classroom as it offers much towards the overall needs of children. He points out that by integrating such approaches children study activities which have practical educational value, and are motivated in what they are studying. He also emphasizes that children should be introduced to a wide range of the language items that makes it meaningful and understandable. It is also to be noted that children should not be introduced to the English language in an artificially pre-determined, strenuous sequence of grammatical structures or functions.

### **Nursery Rhymes as Resourceful Instructional Material**

Nursery rhymes have always remained a resourceful instructional material for this purpose. No matter how old one is, or how learned he is, it is fascinating to note that the nursery rhymes we learn as children remain fresh in our minds, even as we age. This is because of the foundation it lays in minds, of the language that we use almost every day. Though its didactic value is vast, the part played by nursery rhymes in forming the basis for language learning is integral. It's even more interesting to know how children acquire English as a second language through such nursery rhymes. This is so because, rhymes are one of the most enthralling and culturally rich resources that can easily be used in a language classroom, and it offers a change from droning classroom activities.

It is also a valuable resource to develop student's basic abilities in language learning such as Listening, Speaking and Reading. They can also be used to teach various important structural aspects of the language such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm, adjectives, and adverbs. Learning English through rhymes also provides a non-threatening atmosphere for students, who usually find it intimidating to speak English in any formal setting. Important features of the language such as stress, rhythm, intonation are also presented through nursery rhymes; thus, through using them, the language which is broken into a series of structural units, is learnt.

### **Main Functions of Nursery Rhymes in Language Learning**

The main functions of the nursery rhymes in a language learning context can be pointed out as follows:

1. Phonemic awareness
2. Developing the vocabulary
3. Inductive learning of Grammar
4. Developing auditory skills in the language learner.

### **Use of Nursery Rhymes in Language Learning Class**

To understand how nursery rhymes help in language acquisition, it is important to note how they are taught. The teacher selects the rhymes, appropriate to the age group it aims at. After the rhymes are selected, the teacher recites the rhymes with actions, to the eager set of listeners. The students remain silent and listen attentively when the teacher recites the rhyme. After repeating the rhyme for a couple of times the students are made to sing along with the teacher.

Though the student will not be able to memorize the whole rhyme at once, they attempt to utter a few words that they have memorized. The teacher also helps the students, by prompting, as they try. Through this method the young learner is able to repeat the rhyme many times till it is unconsciously internalized in their memory, laying the foundation for language acquisition.

### **Internalizing Basic Grammatical Structures**

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Meaning plays an integral role in teaching grammar. Thus, it is necessary to learn any grammar point in context. Rhymes must be selected and taught effectively for the young learner to learn grammar efficiently. Nursery rhymes are used to both present and practice grammar.

Since rhymes are repeated numerous times, comprehended, and considered, they act as an efficient tool for internalising specific grammatical structures. The patterns in nursery rhymes usually consist of simple grammatical items such as noun, verb, adjectives, phrase structures etc. Through repeating and trying to understand the nursery rhyme taught, the grammatical structures become more deeply internalized. Grammar is instilled in to the young minds through the sentence patterns, tense and other such grammatical units found in the rhyme.

Though young learners do not realise the importance or the need for grammar in a language, its foundations are unconsciously internalised in their learning patterns.

### **Phonemic Awareness**

The importance of learning the sounds of language in any successful language acquisition was established only during the late years of the nineteenth century. Many reformers such as Wilhelm Vietor, Henry Sweet and others in the nineteenth century shared beliefs about the principles on which a new approach to teaching foreign languages should be based. They believed that the spoken language was pivotal and phonetics should be applied to teaching any new language.

Phonemic awareness or phonological awareness can be defined as the awareness that language is made up of various sounds, and establishing the importance of these sounds in formation of syllables, words, and sentences. Many speech language pathologists have explained the importance of phonemic awareness in an educational setting. It is essential to lay the foundation for spelling and reading abilities in a learner. Many researchers have also stressed that children with weak phonological skills have weak reading skills.

Nursery rhymes play a very important role in developing phonemic awareness in kindergarten students. By spending most of their time listening and reciting rhymes, they are unconsciously listening to how sounds of the language are incorporated within words and sentences.

When a teacher teaches a nursery rhyme, she exaggerates and stresses on the rhyming words. When the rhyme is finished, it is noticed that children learn words that rhyme, faster. Once these rhyming words are learnt by the students the teacher then prompts the student to produce new words with the same rhyming scheme by prompting the beginning phoneme.

### **Development of Vocabulary**

Nursery rhymes are composed of fantastic and charming stories, vibrant language and colourful characters. These rhymes have caught the mind's eye of children and fascinated them for centuries. Children are also introduced to a fantasy world that helps them expand their horizons of imagination. As seen earlier, nursery rhymes are taught to children with actions, performed by the instructor. The teacher performs different actions to help children in learning the word and the rhyme better. By actions children learn the meaning of a word through association of actions. Nursery rhymes are often recited by the teacher in the class to an eager set of young learners and when the teacher recites it, she does so using various gestures and actions to enhance children to understand better.

### **Theory of Total Physical Response**

James Asher's Theory of Total physical response, often termed as TPR, is a language teaching method built around this co-ordination of speech and action. It focuses mainly on learning a language through physical (motor) activity. James Asher's theory is similar to Krashen's hypotheses about how comprehensible input and stress reduction plays important role in any successful language acquisition. Many linguists have agreed that the right hemisphere of the brain receives signals and then transfers it to the left hemisphere which helps in incorporating the signals and helps in the production of the language.

Based on this theory one can understand how through actions the student guesses the meaning of what the word stands for. Typically, a nursery rhyme consists of easy to understand vocabulary plus a catchy rhyme. This allows children to learn to sing the rhyme

easily, and because of this particular aspect nursery rhymes are more often used as a means to assist young children build their vocabulary.

### **Substituting New Words for Known Words**

Nursery rhymes also help in expanding the student's vocabulary by introducing them to newer words that can be substituted for normal words used in day to day conversations. The young language learners' vocabulary is also built through the understanding of words used in the rhyme.

With the development of science and technology, Nursery rhymes and the themes that are dealt with in it, has also developed. Rhymes are made colourful and entertaining with multimedia visualisations, gripping the young learner's attention both visually and auditory. It consists of vividly coloured cartoons, animatedly singing and dancing the rhyme, entrancing the interests of the young language learner. Many linguists have theorised how "Motivation" plays an integral part in any successful language learning. The same way young English language learner should be motivated in learning it. Nursery rhymes cater to this need by regulating their motivation; and also performing the entertaining role to keep the learner's attention intact.

### **To Conclude**

Nursery rhymes have always proven to be one of the best ways to teach a language to young learners, as they convey a lot to learn, keeping the learner's attention intact. A young learner loves to play with colours, catchy rhyme and gripping music. Nursery rhymes are a perfect combination of all these.

With the advent of science and technology, and ever-changing learner's needs, new instructional materials are introduced every day. Though use of Nursery Rhymes as instructional material has reduced considerably, it will always remain one of the best, entertaining, educating sources of language learning.

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### Colophon:

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