

Developing Language Skills through Nursery Rhymes

LI Qing-feng

(School of Foreign Languages, Ningxia University, Yinchuan, Ningxia 750021, China)

Abstract: Nursery rhymes have some specific features and properties. They can introduce a simple story structure and provide short and simple texts which can be remembered easily. They are fun for young learners because they rhyme, easy to follow and easy to remember. At the moment when they are entertained, they can also develop their language skills. In this paper, the writer is going to study why teachers' choice of nursery rhymes can help young learners develop listening and articulation, phonological awareness and word recognition skills.

Key words: nursery rhymes; language development; language skills

1. Introduction

Young language learners are introduced to the mysteries of a foreign language. They need to learn the language and develop their language skills. This occurs as they interact with and are guided by teachers. It is believed that teachers' choice of reading nursery rhymes to young language learners is a powerful way of introducing them to early learning experience that has been identified as making a difference in later success in reading and writing. Nursery rhymes contain what will be fun for young learners because they rhyme, easy to follow and easy to remember. A great many language skills are learned when they are exposed to nursery rhymes. In this paper, the writer is going to study why teachers' choice of nursery rhymes can help young learners develop listening and articulation, phonological awareness and word recognition skills which are closely related to how well and successfully they read in later years' language learning.

2. Listening and Articulation Skills

Nursery rhymes in a language for children have been passed down for generations and they have some specific features and properties. They introduce young learners to a story structure in a most basic form and provide them with short, simple texts which can be easily remembered. Learners can be entertained by the rhythmic property. However, they are a lot more than entertainment. They are full of rhymes and alliterations which can be employed by teachers to train learners' listening and articulation skills.

Machado argues that "a person does not always listen for knowledge but may listen to a sound because it is pleasing to hear" (1995: 138). If learners listen to a certain nursery rhyme for the first time, they may not fully understand it. However, they like it very much because they find pleasure and entertainment in hearing the rhyming words. If language development is the goal for learners' early experience, auditory appeal is one of the best reasons for teachers to choose nursery rhymes. Rhymes and alliterations may seem to be the tools of poets and writers only at the first glance. However, when teachers read nursery rhymes again and again to the learners, they become familiar with the rhymes and alliterations, and later on their familiarity with the rhymes and

LI Qing-feng, female, M.A., associate professor of School of Foreign Languages, Ningxia University; research fields: functional grammar, English language teaching.

alliterations may be reinforced in the process of listening and may serve as the basis for learning to read.

Machado also notes that “listening is a learned behaviour, a mental process that is concerned with hearing, attending, discriminating, understanding and remembering” (ibid: 137). When learners hear a nursery rhyme, they hear their teachers’ articulation, listen attentively, try to discriminate the different sounds and understand the meaning conveyed by the sounds, and they try to recite it themselves after hearing it many times. The teachers’ reading is entertaining because they use their voice in special ways: they alter the pitch or speed to add suspense; they emphasize part of a phrase to hold interest; they use tone and facial gesture to signal that learners should join in and repeat. They expect a purposeful listening practice so that learners can become aware of the different sounds and will be able to discriminate the speech sounds, and eventually can create some similar sounds with the help of their listening experience.

Except helping learners develop their listening skill, nursery rhymes can also help develop their articulation skill. Gordon and Browne study language skills in early childhood and claim that “articulation is one of the important components of childhood language skills”. (1993: 422) Articulation is how learners actually say the sounds and words. Learners’ ability to produce sound is a critical link in their connecting the sounds to form speech. In listening and reciting nursery rhymes, learners can hear and produce sounds that differ widely, and sounds that differ in small ways. As Machado notes, “it is a difficult task for children to make recognizable sounds with mouth, throat, and breath control working in unison”. (1995: 25) Then, there must be an approach which teachers can use to help their learners in improving their articulation.

Young learners learning a foreign language may repeat what is said to them. They repeat words and sometimes parts of sentences. In this process, their growing language skills make them become fluent speakers. Teachers can create a repetition experience and promote an enjoyable mimicking for the learners to imitate the pronunciation of some sounds again and again till they can pronounce the words very well. Learners are shown not only how to articulate words, but also how to modulate their voices and pronounce clearly. They learn to pronounce words easily without effort and seem to catch on quick to the words while experiencing the rhyme of the language.

3. Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is referred to by Weaver as “an awareness of various units of sound, such as syllables, onsets and rimes, and phonemes” (1998: 27). Learners’ ability to pay attention to rhymes, alliterations, and other speech sound properties is part of what is called phonological awareness. This awareness of speech sound is an important bridge between speaking and reading and it will help learners become good readers and spellers later on.

The most effective way of developing learners’ phonological awareness necessary for future successful reading and writing is through teaching letters and letter clusters with an emphasis on their phonological equivalent. Weinberger studies the sounds within words, and claims that “there are three ways of separating the sounds within words. One is the syllable, another is the phoneme, and the third is the intra-syllabic unit” (1996: 33). Learners can be trained to separate the sounds within words and learn how to divide words into sequences of elementary sounds.

Phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that can change the meaning of a word. For example, if we change the /b/ sound in the word “bill” to /p/ sound, the meaning will be changed. We can analyse a single-syllable word and

say that the sound at the beginning is known as the “onset” and the sound at the end is known as the “rime”. If learners are asked to distinguish the onset and the rime, they can easily fulfill the task. Their sensitivity to the sound units can be enhanced because they can find words which start and end with the same sound. These are single-syllable words that young learners need to learn in order to build up their vocabulary.

As teachers help the learners develop sound sensitivity, they open the door to a world of language knowledge which will benefit the learners in their future reading and writing. With practice in hearing the sounds of the words, learners can be clear about the letter-sound relationship. At a very simple level, phonological awareness develops as children discriminate sounds in rhymes. According to Weinberger (1996), children learning their first language can acquire awareness of onset and rime and of phoneme at different stages of development, and many children can detect onset and rime even before they can read. Therefore, in teaching a foreign language to young learners, in order to facilitate their development of phonological awareness, teachers can reread learners’ favorite nursery rhymes and help them in becoming more conscious of the sounds in the language.

Many learners have a natural interest in rhymes and alliterations and they begin to focus some attention on speech sound. Teachers can play an active role in helping learners acquire and develop their phonemic awareness. During the learning process, learners’ awareness of the speech sound develops naturally within the context of reading, particularly shared reading when the words are read aloud. Teachers can begin drawing learners’ attention to the speech sound while reading nursery rhymes to them. Once learners are sensitive to rhymes and alliterations, they are in a position to recognize words that share a common sound. When young learners are given consistent training in phonological awareness that focuses on the speech sound patterns of the language, their phonological awareness can be significantly enhanced.

4. Word Recognition

Teachers can help learners make comments about letters in words by looking at initial and final letters. They can also pay attention to clusters of letters so that they can be familiar with those letters that often go together. It can be said that the greater their experience with words, the more likely they are to recognize and spell them. Young learners who have a well-developed appreciation for the sounds in words will understand quickly how the alphabets are used to spell words and will become a good reader and speller. When learners achieve phonological awareness, they are able to know what words mean. Learners learning to read need to attend closely the letters or letter clusters to recognize a word. They can learn to focus on the largest clusters of letters within a word that will enable them to analyse the word most rapidly. They recognize a familiar cluster at once and link it with sounds.

Many of the nursery rhymes contain common word families. Words in one family are those that have a common feature or pattern. They have some of the same combination of letters in them and a similar sound. For example, cat, hat, bat, fat, and mat are a family of words with the /æ t/ sound and the letter combination in common. While reading, learners attach sounds to a cluster of letters rather than to a single letter. In fact, when teachers begin to read nursery rhymes to the learners, they are beginning to teach learners to develop their word recognition ability, and learners learn to recognize the similarities and differences in the words.

Word recognition ability can be taught through the conversation between teachers and learners. Bradley and Bryant (1985) suggest one method with which two things are to be done. One is to make learners more aware of the sounds shared by different words, and the other is to give them the idea that words with common sounds often share the same spelling patterns. All these activities can help learners recognize and remember words. To illustrate

what Bradley and Bryant suggest, let's first look at the following nursery rhyme:

Jack and Jill went up the hill,
To fetch a pail of water,
Jack fell down,
And broke his crown,
And Jill came tumbling after.
Then up Jack got, and home did trot,
As fast as he could caper,
They put him to bed,
And plastered his head,
With vinegar and brown paper.

After choosing the nursery rhyme and reading it to learners a number of times, teachers can have the learners recite it until they can say it aloud easily and playfully. It can be noticed in this nursery rhyme that “water” and “after”, “down” and “crown”, “got” and “trot”, “caper” and “paper” rhyme; “Jack” and “Jill”, “fetch” and “fell” have the same beginning sound; “pail” and “came”, “Jill” and “hill”, “did” and “him” share the same middle sound. Learners are very sensitive to these words while reading them. Therefore, teachers can ask questions such as “What words in the nursery rhyme look alike?” or “Can you see the part of these words that is the same?” so as to ask the learners to identify these words which have the same rhyming sound, the same beginning sound or the same middle sound. Teachers can also ask the learners if they know any other words that sound the same. Learners feel interested and motivated in this activity and they may show much more interest in the sounds of the words.

5. Conclusion

Nursery rhymes are ideally suited toward developing learners' sensitivity of the sound patterns of a language. Through nursery rhymes, young learners will be introduced effortlessly to the sounds and ways of saying the language and ways of recognizing words. Through nursery rhymes, learners can also build up a bank of words which they know how to articulate correctly. Therefore, they can use the nursery rhymes as references, going back to them when they want to know how to read a new word. It is believed that teachers' choice of nursery rhymes may pave the way for the skill with sounds which has a powerful and widespread effect in learners' learning experience. Nursery rhymes can become an important part in an attempt in early foreign language learning.

References:

- Bryant, P. & Bradley, L.. 1985. *Children's Reading Problems: Psychology and Education*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
Gordon, A. & Browne, K. W.. 1993. *Beginnings and Beyond*. New York: Delmar Publishers.
Machado, J. M.. 1995. *Early Childhood Experiences in Language Arts: Emerging Literacy*. New York: Delmar Publishers.
Weaver, C.. 1998. *Reconsidering a Balanced Approach to Reading*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.
Weinberger, J.. 1996. *Literacy Goes to School*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.

(Edited by Jessica, Wendy and Doris)