# Making the Match: Traditional Nursery Rhymes and Teaching English to Modern Children

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## Abstract

Nursery rhymes have been used in teaching English to children for a long time and for a variety of reasons, including linguistic, cognitive, affective, and cultural ones. However, because many rhymes were created more than a hundred years ago, when society cherished somewhat different values from those in the modern day, care should be exercised when choosing the rhymes to be used in teaching modern-day children. The article argues for and develops criteria that can help teachers of young and very young learners select the rhymes suitable for language instruction in terms of their content, accompanying illustrations and language. Thus, rhymes need to be considered from the point of view of the relevance of their content to the children's world and their age appropriateness, and whether they provide material for encouragement of discussion and exploration of values, as well as the means for overcoming a variety of problems children may encounter in their daily lives. Accompanying illustrations should also be observed concerning the representation of characters, the settings and activities they engage in, as well as the synchronization of illustrations with the text. Finally, the criteria for choosing from the linguistic point of view should include selecting the rhymes based on the appropriate level of the language used, the rhymes' language learning potential, and their potential for development of activities around the rhyme.

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## Introduction

In 1815, one of the earliest surviving copies of *Tommy Thumb's Songbook,* first published in 1744, appeared with notes to caregivers which recognized the role of nursery rhymes as language-teaching tools. This 32-page picturebook, complying with the standards for page numbers in similar publications today (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 11), devotes its first part to teaching individual words through the medium of pictures, accompanied by clearly stated instructions as to how to approach vocabulary teaching:

> The method I propose, is that you first shew the child the following animals, one at a time, and pronounce its sound, as for example. Ask which is the DOG? then point to it, then ask what the DOG says, then say, BOW, WOW, WOW. and so on to the rest, by which means, the child in a short time, will be able to do the same [*sic!*]. (1815, p. 8)

This part is followed by nine nursery rhymes, sorted according to their complexity, starting with the rhyme fittingly titled 'The features' (Figure 1), again focusing on its teaching potential. Two hundred years later, nursery rhymes are still being used to aid language development, both in acquisition of the mother tongue and second languages. Tongue twisters, riddles, proverbs, lullabies, clapping rhymes, finger rhymes, counting-out rhymes, alphabet rhymes, limericks and feature -naming rhymes all fall into the category of nursery rhymes, function as songs as well. They are 'a common "ingredient" of various programs and are often included in students' books used in English language teaching, especially at preschool and early school age' (Prosic-
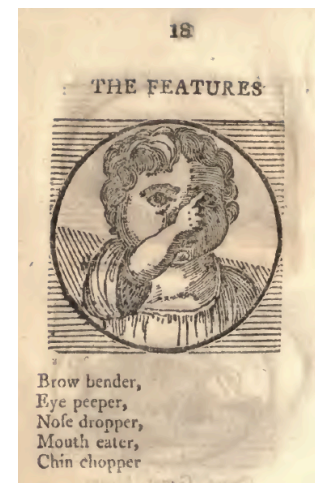


Figure 1. 'The features' (anonymous, 1815, public domain)

Santovac, 2009a, p. 64). Being in the public domain, the traditional corpus of Mother Goose nursery rhymes lends itself well to such utilization, and many of the rhymes are also frequently reprinted in new collections, in addition to being freely available on the internet, which is especially important for those EFL learning environments that do not have access to printed sources from English-speaking countries, as it provides accessible authentic material for use in classrooms, without the danger of copyright infringement. More importantly, however, 'the language in traditional songs is rich and colourful and extends the children's vocabulary beyond the limited range of their own day-to-day experiences' (Reilly & Ward, 2003, p. 18), providing alternative learning context which 'enriches learning and makes it meaningful and holistic' (DeCastro, 2000, p. 3).

## Review of the Literature

Use of nursery rhymes in teaching English to young learners has been recommended by various authors with a view to experiencing language in a holistic way, by seamlessly acquiring grammar (Pinter, 2006, p. 86) and functional chunks (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010, p. 56) which subsequently 'form part of a child's linguistic data base from which generalisations may be made' (Rixon, 1996, p. 36). Nursery rhymes abound in partial repetition at the linguistic level, with 'many repetitions of word sequences contain[ing] slight variations, which from the child's point of view, may aid the perception of abstract linguistic categories' (Crystal, 2001, p. 29) and language patterns (Gordon, 2007, p. 99). Thus, due to the repetitive language and the repetitive nature of their use, nursery rhymes lend themselves well to functioning as linguistic drills, without the accompanying feeling of potential boredom or frustration (Crystal, 2001, p. 28) and they help in developing automaticity of language use, alongside catering for different learning styles and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011). In addition, they provide ample opportunities for recycling the language by offering a wide range of options for developing classroom activities to accompany them.

Nursery rhymes can be used as a valuable motivational tool for phonological and phonemic awareness instruction (Cremin, Bearne, Dombey & Lewis, 2009; Shin & Crandall, 2014), as they 'help language learners acquire connected speech' (Bland, 2013, p. 162). They are considered to be especially useful for intonation and pronunciation

practice 'in a stress-timed language such as English because the rhythm forces [children] to put the stress in the right places and to observe the strong and weak forms' (Reilly & Ward, 2003, p. 18). Prosody and rhythm are frequent reasons for recommendation of nursery rhyme use in foreign language teaching, but surprisingly few empirical studies are available to support this practice in theory. Campfield and Murphy (2013, 2014) investigated the influence of rhythm-salient input in the form of nursery rhymes on children's L2 acquisition, 'establish[ing] a clear link between implicit L2 acquisition and prosody' (Campfield and Murphy, 2014, p. 207). They arrived at the conclusion that 'young L2 beginners seem predisposed to benefit from prosodic cues in the speech signal and may be able to learn some aspects of L2 structure inductively' through 'exposure to prosodically rich L2 input' (Campfield and Murphy, 2013, p. 16). The implications for classroom practice are unambiguous, and are further supported by the fact that implementation of rhymes into young learners' curriculum 'ensures that pronunciation and prosodic features (pitch, tempo, volume, rhythm and intonation) are taken up pleasurably, with singsong ease' (Bland, 2015, pp. 150-151).

The ludic aspect of nursery rhymes plays an important role in providing pleasurable conditions for language acquisition, as children 'spend a great deal of their time producing or receiving playful language', since for them, 'a good deal of language remains primarily driven by sound rather than meaning' (Cook, 1997, p. 228). Therefore, teachers need to follow the logic 'which underlies all good educational practice: that one will make most progress when teaching can be related to what the student already knows' (Crystal, 2001, p. 184), and utilize children's love of playful interaction with the language through the use of nursery rhymes which contain 'an element of fun, of playing with the language' (Scott & Ytreberg, 1991, p. 27). From a psychological point of view, some rhymes, if dealt with in a developmentally suitable manner, can 'provide children with the tools for acquiring the necessary knowledge both about themselves and the world around them and the indispensable skill of dealing with emotions', thus helping them develop emotional intelligence (Prosic-Santovac, 2009a, p. 47). In addition, classroom singing and chanting can result in creating 'group identity, shared social experience, a sense of security and strength in numbers, motivation and a sensuous pleasure in words and rhythm' (Bland, 2013, p. 159). Thus, using nursery rhymes in teaching English to young learners aids

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building a positive classroom atmosphere, lowering learners' affective filter and raising their motivation for learning, since apart from contributing to learners' sense of belonging, performing the rhymes can have the effect of a heightened 'sense of pride and achievement' for individual students (Harmer, 2012, p. 208).

Just as language play functions as 'a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar linguistic world' and 'a point of connection with the rest of the curriculum' (Crystal, 2001, p. 187), nursery rhymes provide a 'third space' (Levy, 2008) for children, both in terms of bridging the gap between home and school practices, taking into account their familiar form, and between domestic and target cultures, as some rhymes can appear across different cultures with slight variations in content or melody.[1] In addition, rhymes that are unique to any or many of the target cultures contribute to familiarising children with these by 'reflect[ing] the target culture and provid[ing] students with an experience in common with native speakers' (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010, p. 397), which helps promote open-mindedness in young learners. However, because the oldest
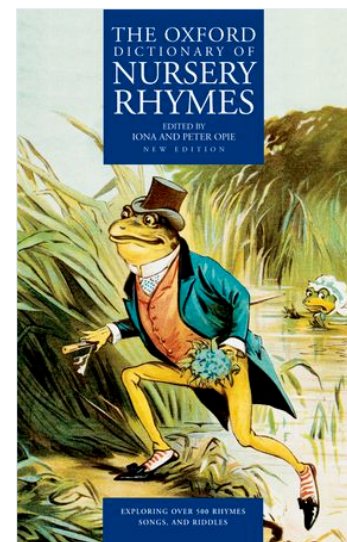
Figure 2. Front cover of *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1997, 2nd ed.), edited by Iona and Peter Opie

recorded Mother Goose nursery rhymes date as far back as the sixteenth century, with a majority being first recorded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 7), it is natural that, by and large, the messages contained in these rhymes 'reflect the ideas and attitudes of societies and individuals that created [them]' (Prosic-Santovac, 2007, p. 427). Because of that, they sometimes 'offer a wide variety of desirable lessons, worth incorporating into the modern education of a child, but they can also simultaneously include some ideas that promote either unacceptable or simply out-dated attitudes' (Prosic-Santovac, 2007, p. 427).

## Criteria for Choosing Appropriate Rhymes

Because values thus interwoven into the fabric of the rhymes can imperceptibly imprint themselves onto the young learners' minds, in addition to the fact that the rhyme content can also be incompatible with today's children's experience of the world, it is necessary to

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establish criteria for choosing rhymes to be used in teaching English, taking into account their content, the accompanying illustrations and the language used. Within these three categories, the rhymes should be scrutinized from a moral, linguistic and psycho-pedagogical point of view, so that the rhymes are not used in teaching English to young and very young learners to the detriment of children themselves, 'because of the far-reaching consequences that the knowledge and attitudes acquired at an early age can have on the life of a child' (Prosic-Santovac, 2009a, p. 64).

**Content**. Apart from carefully inspecting the representation of power relations and the characters in the story line of the rhymes to be used in a language classroom, the content of the rhymes needs also to be examined from the point of view of its relevance to the children's world, in terms of how well it corresponds to children's interests, whether it is age appropriate, whether it provides material for encouragement of discussion and exploration of values, as well as the means for overcoming a variety of problems children may encounter in their daily lives.

**Relevance**. Usually it is the case that 'children's literature features themes and content that are relevant to young learners and addresses their concerns, fears and aspirations and thus can provide a motivating and engaging medium for instruction' (Ghosn, 2013, p. 52). However, in the case of nursery rhymes this can sometimes present an issue, as traditional rhymes have come into existence in a variety of ways, and not all have a connection with the nursery; thus, some represent remnants of, or were adapted from, a range of sources, such as ballads or adults' songs (Prosic-Santovac, 2009a, pp. 17-24), which is why teachers need to select those rhymes that deal with topics of interest to children. However, while doing her research on poetry preferences of children in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades of primary school, Terry (1974) found that teachers' selection of poetry was often in discrepancy with the pupils' preferences (p. 53). Because of this, it is important not to 'limit children's repertoire of texts to only the teacher's choice and . . . to build upon the out-of-school interests of the children themselves' (Horner & Ryf, 2007, p. 28). With this in mind, McClure (2003) makes a recommendation to teachers to begin 'expanding their poetry selections, moving beyond what they [think] children *should* like, to choosing poetry they [think] children *would* like' (p. 78; emphasis in original). However, I argue that the teachers ought not to act based only on their assumptions, but in

order to avoid guesswork as much as possible, to opt for conducting in-class surveys instead, if necessary in the mother tongue, as this would help them arrive at informed conclusions about the preferences of the particular children they have at hand.

**Age appropriateness.** Age is a significant factor that needs to be taken into account when deciding on children's interests, as well. Building upon Terry's research (1974), Fisher and Natarella (1982) examined poetry preferences of first, second and third graders, and found that they preferred traditional over modern poetry, which was in direct opposition to the preferences of the older children from Terry's study, and speaks in favour of using Mother Goose nursery rhymes with young learners in lower grades of primary school. However, nuances in their development should be paid attention to as well, and one should not use the rhymes that are either above or below the developmental stage of the children. For example, the following rhyme would be rather unsuitable for use with young learners, while it would perfectly fit the world experience and schemata of most very young learners:

> Round and round the garden
> Like a teddy bear;
> One step, two step,
> Tickle you under there! (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 215)

On the other hand, very young learners, being in the pre-operational stage characterized by egocentrism in Piagetian sense of the word, i.e. 'the inability to distinguish one's own view from the viewpoints of others' (Hauser-Cram, Nugent, Thies & Travers, 2014, p. 317), would have a hard time understanding the main point of the following rhyme:

> A wise old owl lived in an oak;
> The more he saw the less he spoke;
> The less he spoke the more he heard.
> Why can't we all be like that wise old bird? (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 403)

Nevertheless, the same rhyme can successfully serve as encouragement of discussion on the topic of importance of actively listening to others with a group of older learners who need to learn about different ways of solving conflicts, for example.

**Means for overcoming problems.** In order for nursery rhymes to be relevant to young learners, 'understanding the meaning of the text and applying it to [their] own lives

and experiences is the key' (Horner & Ryf, 2007, p. 13). English language lessons offer a fair amount of freedom to teachers in terms of the opportunity to include topics not covered in assigned textbooks. Therefore, they possess great potential for teaching children how to overcome and resolve some of the problems they come across in their daily experiences, especially those connected with school social life. Thus, for example, the notorious topic of bullying can be approached by choosing adequate rhymes for further development in class. What needs to be taken into consideration is that the choice should be made based on the way the topic is presented, preferably containing the problem declaration, followed by a potential solution,[2] as in this example dealing with human characters:

> Jack and Gye
> Went out in the rye,
> And they found a little boy with one black eye.
> Come, says Jack, let's knock him on the head.
> No, says Gye, let's buy him some bread;
> You buy one loaf and I'll buy two,
> And we'll bring him up as other folk do. (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 265)

This rhyme offers three perspectives: the bully's (Jack), the victim's (the little boy) and the witness's (Gye), and offers a valuable lesson about the role of bystanders in the prevention of bullying if developed properly with the pupils. Similarly, rhymes can function as a prompt for the discussion about the attitude towards animal abuse:

> Ding, dong, bell,
> Pussy's in the well.
> Who put her in?
> Little Johnny Green.
> Who pulled her out?
> Little Tommy Stout.
> What a naughty boy was that,
> To try to drown poor pussy cat,
> Who never did him any harm,
> And killed the mice in his father's barn. (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 174)

**Exploration of values.** When choosing rhymes to use in a young learner classroom, teachers should pay attention to how well they lend themselves to the exploration of different values through their content. Power relations, for example, are a frequent issue in all of literature, and they play their role within the realm of nursery

rhymes as well. Thus, for example, 'if a society has racist tendencies, its nursery rhymes might also contain them, in an effort to produce new, well-conformed members of that society' (Prosic-Santovac, 2007, p. 431). Therefore rhymes such as 'Ten little nigger boys' or 'Ten little Injuns' (Opie & Opie, 1997, pp. 386-387), which depict a steady elimination of members of groups viewed as 'Other', would not be a positive choice for a language classroom, although linguistically, they represent a good example of counting activities. Furthermore, as one of the most prominent relationships in a child's world is adult-child relationships, care should be taken over what aspects of this relationship are presented as a desirable model, especially if the caregivers' goal is to raise competent and self-confident children that will grow into adults who are not submissive and can stand up for themselves and others in the world. Thus, the content of the rhyme that follows, which originated from the advice given to servants in days long past (Prosic-Santovac, 2012a, pp. 96-98), would stand in stark contrast to the above stated educational goal:

> Come when you're called,
> Do as you're bid,
> Shut the door after you,
> Never be chid. (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 159)

Therefore, standards for success promoted by the rhymes should be observed, paying special attention to avoiding any implication of their complying with stereotypes of any kind. This can be exemplified by the following rhyme, which stigmatizes boys for openly expressing disturbing emotions through crying, an activity stereotypically associated with the feminine domain:

> When Jacky's a good boy,
> He shall have cakes and custard,
> But when he does nothing but cry,
> He shall have nothing but mustard. (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 283)

The use of rhymes that reinforce gender-related stereotypes should be re-examined, and those that emphasize 'the negative side of femininity for girls (fragility, timidity, obsession with appearance and with domesticity), and the negative side of masculinity for boys (aggression, insensitivity, rudeness, and a refusal to be helpful)' (Davies, 2003, p. xi), should either be avoided or used as a stimulus for discussion. Thus, the following rhyme, if

used at all, ought to be accompanied by activities[3] whose aim is to prevent the stereotypes from persisting:

> What are little boys made of?
> What are little boys made of?
> Frogs and snails
> And puppy-dogs' tails,
> That's what little boys are made of.
>
> What are little girls made of?
> What are little girls made of?
> Sugar and spice
> And all that's nice,
> That's what little girls are made of. (Opie & Opie, 1997, pp. 116-117)

In addition, teachers should exercise avoidance of subconsciously favouring one gender over the other by carefully planning which rhymes are to be used throughout a course and balancing the number of characters of both genders that are presented in both a positive and negative light.

**Illustrations**

Accompanying illustrations represent an important part of children's experience of a rhyme, especially when it is in a foreign language, as pictures support understanding and can serve the purpose of scaffolding. Therefore, because of 'the huge potential of learning by looking' (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 79), criteria for illustration use should also be set, concerning the representation of characters, both human and animal ones, the settings and activities they engage in, and synchronization of illustrations with the text.

**Human characters.** In addition to content considerations, gender representations should be paid attention to in illustrations as well, and teachers should avoid presenting children only with images that comply with stereotypical views of each gender. Gender bias can be conveyed through choice of stereotypical clothing and hairstyles for the characters which does not reflect a wide range of practices that contemporary children exercise today. Also, body language and facial expressions should have an equal distribution across genders. Thus, both female and male characters ought sometimes to be presented sporting a body posture that signals self-confidence and assertiveness, or a lack of it, for example, and also, both male and female characters should be depicted expressing

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a wide range of emotions on their face, regardless of what is stereotypically considered 'appropriate' for each gender. In addition, taking into account the limiting effects of the growing segregation in today's children's world based on the pink-blue dichotomy (Wong & Hines, 2014), illustrations accompanying the rhymes used in class should not serve the purpose of reinforcing this stereotype, but, instead, present both genders in connection with a variety of colours.

Colour use is also a significant factor in presenting characters of different races and ethnicity. Wherever the text of the rhyme does not limit the representation, illustrations should feature a diverse set of characters, regardless of whether or not 'children in a given country do or do not have the opportunity to actually meet the representatives of the races or nations concerned' (Prosic-Santovac, 2007, p. 432), as such a practice would broaden their views and help develop tolerance towards those groups within their immediate surroundings that differ from themselves. It goes without saying that any stereotypical or negative representations should be avoided here as well. The same is true for images of old or disabled people, or those that belong to a lower socio-economic class, since some popular rhymes, often reprinted in modern collections, do feature characters that belong to these groups, such as 'There was an old woman who lived in a shoe' or 'There was a crooked man' (Comer, 2008, pp. 6, 9). Therefore, if these criteria are observed, the illustrations that accompany the rhymes can serve as a tool for developing a solid base for tolerance in the classroom, which is especially important in environments with special needs students.

**Animal characters.** Nursery rhymes frequently feature animal characters, and can therefore be a useful asset when teaching children animal-related words, 'contextualis[ing] new vocabulary in a fresh way and provid[ing] children with new possibilities of applying the acquired knowledge' (Prosic-Santovac, 2009a, p. 50). Research has shown that 'children's learning from picturebooks is facilitated by realistic illustrations' (Tare, Chiong, Ganea & DeLoache, 2010, p. 395), which is why these and not anthropomorphic ones should be used more frequently in teaching, at least during the beginning stages of instruction. However, in order to promote an egalitarian view of the world and all of its inhabitants and 'a biological model in which humans are one among the animal kinds' (Waxman, Herrmann, Woodring & Medin, 2014, p. 7), it is questionable whether

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anthropomorphic representation of animals should find its place at all in teaching English to young learners, especially with a view to supporting cross-curricular learning, as the practice can interfere with science instruction. The claim that an anthropocentric perspective universally precedes biological in children's development (Carey, 1985) has recently been disputed, and it has been shown that 'the anthropocentric pattern displayed by young urban children is not a universal starting point for development, but is itself culturally-inflected, likely reflecting urban children's sensitivity to an anthropocentric cultural model that is passed along within the discourse of their communities' (Medin, Waxman, Woodring & Washinawatok, 2010, p. 206). Nevertheless, as anthropomorphising animal characters in illustrations accompanying Mother Goose nursery rhymes is a prevalent practice, and is thus difficult to avoid, selection should be made on the basis of the level of anthropomorphism, which should preferably be low (e.g. the goose in Figure 3), with the animal retaining as many original features as possible, including the natural gender markers characteristic of the species. Human gender markers, however, should be avoided, alongside stereotypical imagery (Figures 4 and 5) that helps identify gender either overtly or using subtle devices, such as adding eyelashes only to animals perceived as female, which reinforces the notion of female gender as marked.
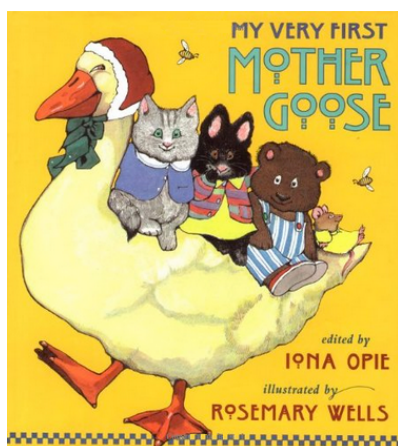


Figure 3. Front cover, *My Very First Mother Goose* (1996) by Iona Opie (ed.) and Rosemary Wells (illus.)
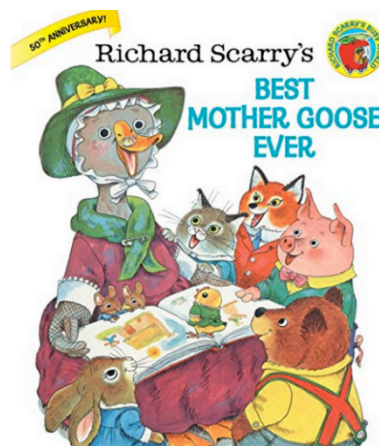
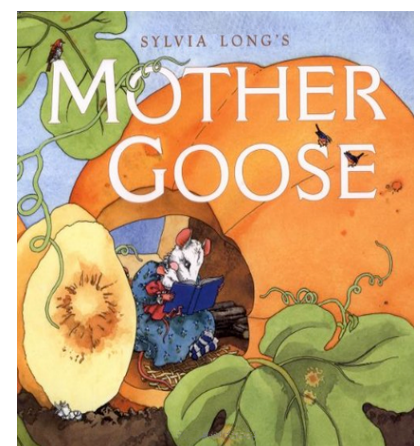Figure 4. Front cover, *Best Mother Goose Ever* (1999) by Richard Scarry (illus.)

Figure 5. Front cover, *Mother Goose* (1999) by Sylvia Long (illus.)

**Settings and activities characters engage in.** Equally important as the presentation of characters themselves is the presentation of the settings they find themselves in and the activities they engage in, especially in cases when the text of the rhyme does not suggest any specific ones. Neither of these should reflect any form of discrimination, nor should it conform to biased, e.g. patriarchal, practice of any kind. Usually, the content itself signals the inappropriateness of using a rhyme in teaching, as in the example of the well-known 'Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater' rhyme, where the literal translation of words into images leads to presenting children with a female character who submissively accepts imprisonment within the domestic domain, with a smile on her face, while the male character operates freely within the public domain (see Figure 6).

In this case, unless teachers expressly wish to open a discussion on gender quality, it would be advisable to turn to alternative sources for both the illustration and the text, which represent human relationships in a more positive light, as is the case in the following rhyme, 'Mr and Ms Pumpkin Eater', taken from *Father Gander Nursery Rhymes* (1994):



Figure 6. 'Peter, Peter, Pumkin Eater' (Comer, 2008, p. 17). Reproduced by kind permission of Hinkler Books, Australia

> Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater,
> Had a wife and wished to keep her.
> Treated her with fair respect,
> She stayed with him and hugged his neck! (Larche, 1994, p. 36)

The illustration accompanying the alternative rhyme features the same metaphor for home, a pumpkin, but one with doors open to the world, while the wife and the husband stand on top of it united and free (Larche, 1994, p. 37).
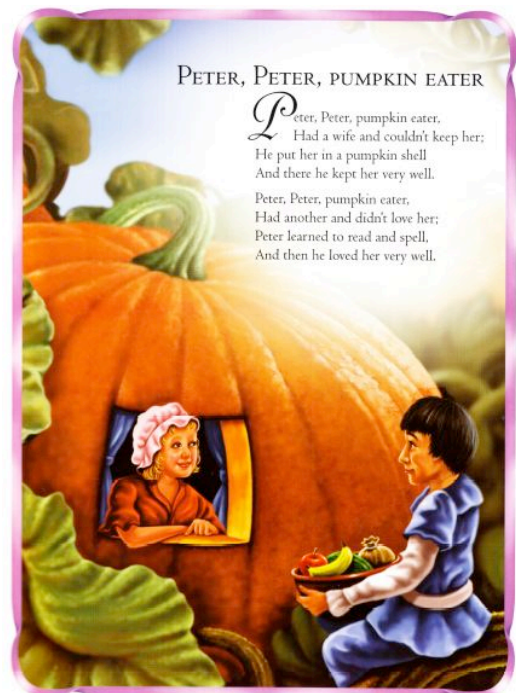
**Synchronisation with the text.** In the context of early language learning, it is useful to define the distinction between illustrated chapter books and picturebooks. Jalongo (2004) defines a book as illustrated if 'drawings are placed periodically in the text', while in a picturebook 'both the words and the pictures are 'read', and the pictures extend,

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clarify, complement, or take the place of words' (p. 11). Each of these has their place in English language teaching, depending on the age and the level of knowledge of the learners. Thus, at the very beginning, picturebooks are recommended, preferably containing one nursery rhyme only and at least one complete illustration per line of text, in the sense that all the lexical words are represented in the picture which accompanies the line. Ellis and Brewster (2014) recommend that illustrations in picturebooks 'synchronise with the text to help clarify and support learning' (p. 18) and this allows the teacher to point to individual items or actions first, in order to scaffold learning, and later allows the child to take an active role, apart from reciting or singing. Here 'a simple picture-word relationship' (Mourão, 2011, p. 11) with pictures showing and words telling the same information means that very little additional information is given to confuse or distract the learner. The transition to illustrated books should be gradual, using first the books that contain the rhymes already encountered via picturebooks, with each rhyme accompanied by one illustration in symmetrical interaction, which implies that 'the words and pictures tell the same story, essentially repeating information in different forms of communication' (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000, p. 225).

**Language**

Since the main objective of including rhymes in teaching English to young learners is language learning, this aspect of nursery rhymes should be given due attention as well. The criteria for choosing from the linguistic point of view should, therefore, include selecting the rhymes based on the appropriate level of the language used, the language-learning potential the rhymes offer, and their potential for development of activities around the rhyme. It need not be additionally emphasized that the language of the rhymes used in a classroom must not be offensive in any way.[4]

**Appropriate level.** Research has confirmed the obvious postulate that 'if children cannot make sense of a poem, they are unlikely to enjoy it' (Stagg Peterson & Swartz, 2008, p. 30). Thus, Curtain and Dahlberg (2010) suggest using rhymes with limited vocabulary, 'compatible with the language being used in the classroom so that the words and concepts in the song reinforce or introduce material used for many other activities in the curriculum' (p. 396). Such a choice should be supported by repetitive language, and, if

accompanied by melody, nursery rhymes should present 'a limited musical challenge, especially in the primary grades' in order not to overshadow language objectives (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010, p. 396). Archaic or incorrect grammatical construction, as present in the following rhyme, should be avoided, or at least corrected to conform to modern norms, as using them could lead to erroneous acquisition of language structures in the early learning stages:

> Tom, Tom, the piper's son,
> Stole a pig and away he *run*;
> The pig *was eat*
> And Tom *was beat*,
> And Tom went howling down the street. (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 493; italics mine)

Vásquez, Hansen & Smith (2010) suggest using such rhymes at the secondary level with the aim of rewriting them and discussing various grammatical concepts, and although this is not applicable to a majority of young learners, similar activities could be used with a group of young learners aged circa 10-12 who share a special interest in grammatical features of the language.

**Language-learning potential.** Apart from expanding vocabulary and, implicitly, grammar knowledge, nursery rhymes should be inspected for other language-learning opportunities as well. Thus, for example, Mother Goose ABC nursery rhymes 'have a long history in the classroom', alongside number and counting rhymes, 'as educators have long known that learning can be fun, and that fun-learning is more easily absorbed' (Delamar, 2001, pp. 76, 89). However, due to their archaic origins, some of the nursery rhymes within the Mother Goose corpus will not necessarily contain, for example, all the letters of the alphabet, so the teachers should opt for those rhymes that 'have been updated to include the complete set of 26 letters known in the contemporary alphabet' (p. 77). Also, the sounds in the rhymes can be used for pronunciation practice, and they should be screened for the presence of alliteration, which is 'much exploited in tongue twisters'[5] (Prosic-Santovac, 2012b, p. 2), as well as in the first line of the following rhyme:

> One *m*isty, *m*oisty, *m*orning,
> When cloudy was the weather,
> There I met an old man
> Clothed all in leather;
> Clothed all in leather,

With cap under his chin.
*How do you do, and how do you do,*
*And how do you do again*? (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 370; italics mine)

Rhymes that offer multiple possibilities provide greater potential for learning, as in the previous example, where the last two lines can aid teaching language functions to learners, as well, serving as an insight into the way people behaved in the past and leading to the introduction of more modern formulations: in contemporary English 'How are you?' is a common greeting and 'How do you do?' is only used in formal introductions.

**Potential for development of activities.** The most important thing to consider when using rhymes in English language teaching is that they are 'most effective when they are an integrated part of the curriculum, selected for their relationship to all of the activities and vocabulary in a class period and not regarded as an add-on or time-filler' (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010, p. 396). What is more, in theme-based instruction, a rhyme can even present the central point in teaching. Therefore, rhymes that offer more opportunities for development of tasks before, during and after the rhyme presentation should have priority over those that cannot be utilized well in a variety of ways. Thus, for example, some of the pre-presentation activities could include vocabulary introduction through miming, pictures or puppets, games connected to the vocabulary in the rhyme or content prediction, using word clouds created by various word cloud generators, which can also be used for rhyme reconstruction, or reused afterwards, for writing a new rhyme or revision (Copland, Garton & Davis, 2012, pp. 102-103). In terms of presentation itself, apart from the teacher's reciting or singing a rhyme, it is useful to choose rhymes that can also be accompanied by audio or video recording. Post-presentation activities (in Table 1) can include oral and writing activities, and other related classroom activities, such as reader's theatre (Fredericks, 2007) or arts and crafts tasks (for additional ideas on activities, see Commins (1988), Hamner (2003) and Norris (1998), for example).

Table 1. Examples of follow-up activities

| Oral activities | Writing activities | Other related classroom activities |
|---|---|---|
| Singing along | Writing captions for illustrations of the song | Drawing illustrations/posters |
| Singing while showing pictures or puppets | Crossword puzzles with vocabulary from the rhyme | Drawing cartoons/comics |
| Sorting jumbled pictures and reciting | Supplying the last word in lines | Creating/solving vocabulary jigsaw puzzles |
| Sorting jumbled verses and reciting | Writing simple sentences to describe the main characters | Making puppets and models |
| Retelling the content using visual prompts | Composing new verses for the rhyme accompanied by melody | Making masks for the characters |
| Commenting on the characters | Rewriting the rhyme with different characters, objects or setting | Inventing actions for the rhyme |
| Role-playing different characters | Rewriting the rhyme in prose form, as a story | Acting out the rhyme |
| Self-recording (audio or video) | Writing a new rhyme, using the predefined rhyming words | Reader's theatre |

**Conclusion**

There are many benefits to using nursery rhymes in teaching English to young and very young learners, as they can contribute to children's linguistic and personal development in a variety of ways. Alongside other works of literature, nursery rhymes are often used as 'vehicle for guidance and instruction' and 'because the adult plays an enormous role in the process of providing reading material for children, the lessons inherent in this literature act as a barometer of the ideology and principles of the society that produces and consumes such works' (Galway, 2008, p. 7). Because many Mother Goose nursery rhymes are more than a hundred years old, criteria have been defined in this article that can help caregivers make a selection of the rhymes to be used in teaching that will aid and not go against modern goals in childhood education. The criteria, encompassing the examination of the content of the rhymes, the accompanying illustrations and the language used, have been developed with the aim of promoting nursery-rhyme use in English language teaching not

only as 'mere resources for teaching literacy', but also as powerful tools of instruction for 'understanding of the human condition' (Cremin et al., 2009, p. 101) and spreading the ideas of egalitarianism and tolerance.

The criteria have been organized into three categories, and presented accordingly for ease of reference. However, not all of them will have the same weight in terms of relevance in different teaching situations, which will be highly dependent on the context the rhymes are used in. If, for example, the rhymes are included in a cross-curricular teaching session or a theme-based instruction unit focusing on animal features, realistic depictions of animals will be paramount and will carry significantly more importance than in a less scientifically-oriented lesson. Therefore, teachers will need to decide on the relevance of individual criteria based on the teaching context they have at hand, or sometimes even not apply them at all while working with very young learners who, at the beginning of their English-language-learning journey, enjoy producing 'chance patterns which are pretty to the ear, but whose meaning may be absurd or unclear' (Cook, 1997, p. 228). They can handle obsolete language, for example, for the sake of rhythm only, 'accept[ing] the rhyme, or bits of it, as rhythmic sound without meaning' (Cook, 2000, p. 25). Nevertheless, many of the morally, linguistically and psycho-pedagogically oriented criteria do bear significance for most teaching situations, and even if some rhymes are used at the early stages without reference to them, children should be encouraged to critically reflect on these issues at later, more advanced stages, both in terms of learning and cognitive development. This can be done through careful planning and creating opportunities for revisiting the rhymes in a spiral curriculum, and developing the 'ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal apparatus that goes with them' (Bruner, 2009, p. 13).

**Notes**

[1] For example, the well-known nursery rhyme 'Ring-a-ring o' roses' has its parallels in other cultures (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 435).

[2] Some rhymes do not explicitly declare bullying as wrong, but present it in a light-hearted way, such as this one that describes physical bullying of a disabled person: 'As I was going to sell my eggs, / I met a man with bandy legs; / Bandy legs and crooked toes, / I tripped

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up his heels and he fell on his nose' (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 259). Teachers would need to exercise sound judgment, taking into account their learners' age and overall maturity, if they opted for using such a rhyme in class as a prompt for discussion.

[3] One such follow-up activity could be, for example, rewriting the rhyme so that gender segregation is avoided, by replacing the nouns 'girls' and 'boys' with the inclusive and gender non-specific noun 'children' (or the informal 'kids' if retaining the number of syllables is of importance) and creating modified, more positive descriptions: 'What are little *children* made of? / What are little *children* made of? / *Kisses* and *hugs*, / And *ladybugs*, / That's what little *children* are made of.'

[4] The examples of offensive use of language are present in the following rhymes: 'Eena, meena, mina, mo, / Catch a *nigger* by his toe; / If he squeals, let him go, / Eena, meena, mina, mo' (Opie & Opie, 1997, p. 184; italics mine) and 'See-saw, Margery Daw, / Sold her bed and lay upon straw; / Was not she a *dirty slut* / To sell her bed and lie in the dirt' (p. 351).

[5] Care should be exercised when using tongue twisters with children whose self-esteem is low for one reason or another, since tongue twisters are often accompanied by erroneous performance and lots of laughter. Unless reassured by the teacher, such activities can be followed by the children's 'withdrawal, both from the activity in question, and the immediate social group' (Prosic-Santovac, 2009b, p. 160).

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