STORIES AND RHYMES WITH YOUNG AND VERY YOUNG LEARNERS

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The future of English language teaching is inevitably connected to starting foreign language lessons as early as possible – still at kindergarten. When teaching young and very young learners, it is important to turn the classes into a positive experience for children – full of games, rhymes, songs and stories which children like and enjoy in their native language. Therefore we have to refer back to the children's favourites in the foreign language classes. The article considers rhymes and stories in particular.

Rhymes and stories alongside with games and songs are part of children's life, they realize connection, such as home – classroom, enjoyment – learning, and raise positive attitude to the foreign language and to foreign languages in general. They provide meaningful context and fast change of activities.

Fleta (2012: 31) states that “at an early age, all children learn languages by listening and by speaking”. Stories and rhymes provide contextualized listening for the children and a wealth of speaking activities based on them: reciting, role play, discussions and problem solving, etc.

Rhymes with young and very young learners

Children love rhymes because of their rhythm and sounding. They contribute to memorization of difficult words and long phrases. Repeating them children improve their pronunciation skills, acquire intonation patterns and develop deeper awareness of and feeling for the foreign language.

Alonso (2012:17) accentuates that “children enjoy language playfulness“ and recommends using “a poem a day” to keep the boredom away. Sundmark (2012) also underlines the usefulness of language play in poetry and verse for language education. Mizera (2008: 37) claims that “language is also considered to have strong relations to art”, especially poetry.

According to Brewster et al (2002: 162), rhymes (and songs) “present familiar language in new and exciting forms and in rich, imaginative context,… provide for lots of natural and enjoyable repetition, … encourage feeling of achievement and build children’s confidence.” Rhymes for children provide a variety of activities based on them and we know that young, and especially very young learners, need fast change of activities (Ilieva, 2013). They can be
accompanied by movements (see Ilieva, 2013: 71), realizing TPR. Linse (2006: 38) states that “the props or actions not only help children remember the words and meanings of new words but also help children remember the context or situation depicted in the piece of verse.”

Another activity connecting rhymes and action in the FL classroom is clapping in the rhythm of the rhyme or chanting it. The rhymes To the Farm, One, Two, Buckle my Shoe and Seasons are suitable for such purposes. In Harman’s opinion, the ability to feel the rhythm is very important for the adequate linguistic development; when the hands clap the rhythm, all – physical, musical and linguistic developments are influenced, children’s hearing and feelings are activated. Ilieva and Baycheva (2010) points out this type of activities as a means of making the classes more interesting, more emotional and more attractive and Baycheva and Baychev (2005) suggest a number of activities connected to the rhythmic of a text that aid memorization.

Involving emotion heightens children’s motivation and makes the language acquisition process more successful. Very often children take these rhymes and actions home, which ensures multiple repetition and enjoyment during out of class activities.

There is plenty of rhymes on various topics, covering different vocabulary items and grammar structures. They can be found easily on the Internet and most of them are with free access, but yet sometimes we have to invent something new, something which is our own for the particular group we are working with.

Here is an example of such a rhyme, a very short one which young and very young learners usually find funny and which can introduce any game:

Two kind hens
jumped out of the fence
together with a cock with a clock.
But the fox found them
And… (the children give suggestions what happens next, which usually include the fox eating the hens or the cock or all of them)
No! They played together a game. Do you know which one? (The teacher introduces a game depending on the purposes of the lesson.)

The rhyme provides cross-curricular relations to natural sciences (animals), to mathematics (telling the time as a game), discussions about relations in nature and human relations (friendship – fox and hens play together).

The following times the rhyme is prolonged:
... But the fox found them

No! (or YES!) They played together a game. Do you know which one?

No! This time they played another game! (The teacher introduces the new game)

The children gradually learn the short rhyme by heart and one of the groups start playing tag with it during the break.

Rhymes can be integrated in stories and various types of games. Bland (2012) also suggests different rhymes as a basis for a variety of activities (TPR, role rhymes, refrain games, etc.) with very young learners. They are all pleasant and funny for the children and ensure introduction or reinforcement of vocabulary on many topics and context for activities that realize cross-curricular relations: TPR and physical education, rhythm and music, animals and nature, counting and mathematics, etc.

Stories with young and very young learners

Stories are children’s favourites and a rich context in the foreign language classroom. “Everyone enjoys a good story, but the value of fairy tales is not simply limited to enjoyment and pleasure” (Coles 2012: 42). In Arcos’ opinion (2012: 21), stories unite both “cognitive and affective constituents of learning” and Horyza (2012: 118) claims that “children need both the linguistic side and the emotional and moral coating of stories”. Involving cognitive skills, values and emotions contributes to successful language learning and acquisition.

Coles (2012: 46) proves that stories and the activities related to them are “a valid didactic instrument of L2 learning at even a very young age”. Almost the same is the opinion of Fraile et al. (2012: 191) who claim that “a well-organized story session can intrigue the students and make them want to explore many features of the language.” Bobkina (2012) also sees literature as a means of contextualizing work upon grammatical structures and the language skills in an intriguing way while Coles (2012) views the benefits of working with fairy tales from the lexical point of view, from the syntactic point of view, from the point of view of information structure (theme and rheme). Work with stories develops children’s linguistic awareness and although we do not teach linguistic phenomena explicitly, the children successfully acquire them and as a result sound fluent when using them.

Work with stories not only builds language awareness but also good pronunciation and intonation patterns. Ilieva (2007) points stories as a means of oral communicative skills development and Mourao (2012: 154) discovers that “the repeated read alouds (RRAs)
prompted physical and verbal responses, the latter authentic, lively talk”. De la Pena Puebla (2012: 53) also stresses that “the role that literature plays in the teaching of speaking and listening is essential for any program addressed to language learners”.

For the purposes of teaching English to young and very young learners we can use easy and simple stories and picture books or invent our own stories or involve the children in creative activities to build the story together. The last provides context for other creative tasks: illustrations, comics, making a book, creating a rhyme, a song or clapping a melody.

Conclusions

Stories and rhymes for children foster the child’s cognitive and linguistic development, its creative potential. They raise positive attitude to the foreign language classes and to the FL itself. The variety of activities and topics, the involvement of emotions together with the rhythm and the fact that children repeat these texts a lot of times with great pleasure even out of class ensure a long lasting retainment in memory. This makes them a suitable language learning material.

References


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Resources
One, Two, Buckle my Shoe http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One,_Two,_Buckle_My_Shoe
Seasons https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/16Uh7Fh3fLDIfXDebl97CmmUcGA7mxBLg-UsoPktt3c/edit?pli=1#slide=id.gec5c13a5_05
To the Farm http://www.canteach.ca/elementary/songspoems55.html

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