

Rhymes, Stories and Songs in the ESL Classroom

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The Value of Rhymes Stories and Songs

Many of the traditional songs, stories and nursery rhymes that people learn as children are ingrained in our culture. The mind of a child absorbs them at home, at school and from television. Teenage and adult English as a Second Language (ESL) students may lack the native speaker's familiarity with the English songs, rhymes and stories. They are at a disadvantage when participating in conversations or watching movies if they lack the knowledge of cultural elements native speakers of English may take for granted. Use of traditional songs, stories and nursery rhymes in the ESL classroom can create an excellent learning experience for the ESL student. In addition to the cultural value, traditional songs, stories and nursery rhymes may help with pronunciation practice and literary skills.

Importance of Cultural Items to Fluent English Speakers

Since English is a complicated language with exceptions seemingly to almost every rule of grammar, ESL students face a multitude of problems. Idioms, slang and cultural items make learning English even more complicated. Cultural items not always considered in ESL classrooms are the songs, stories and nursery rhymes of our culture. In movies and in conversations, there are references to songs, stories and rhymes that English speakers learned as children. The movie, *Star Trek V*, for example, focuses on the song "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." When Spock, Doctor McCoy and Captain Kirk go camping, they decide to engage in a traditional sing-a-long. After reciting the lyrics to Spock, they begin to sing in a round. Spock does not sing at his appointed time because he was busy thinking about the meaning of the lyrics. Spock did not understand the meaning of the song because he tried to take the words as literal facts. He later tells Captain Kirk "Life is not a dream." A non-native speaker of English may not have exposure to the song or understand that it is just a fun, nonsense song. Spock is very well educated and speaks English very well, but the idea of a song that is not completely factual in content is foreign to him. Later in the movie, when Spock claims to be well-versed in the classics, Doctor McCoy reminds Spock that he did not know "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." Since Spock was not raised in the same culture as Kirk and Dr. McCoy, he is at a disadvantage.

Value of Cultural Items to Adults

Some ESL instructors fear they will insult their adult learners by using children's stories, songs, or nursery rhymes but ESL students may feel separated from the mainstream because they have not learned about this part of the English speaking culture. If presented properly, ESL students will take the children's songs and nursery rhymes as an important learning experience. One of my colleagues (who speaks English as her second language and teaches ESL) once spoke of how she did not know many of the children's rhymes or songs and was upset that she could not expose her children to this cultural information. She felt that her children were missing something important. Many other parents feel the same.

Nursery Rhymes and Songs

Nursery rhymes and songs may be used in pronunciation practice. Sing "Mary Had a Little Lamb," for example, to practice the "L" sound or "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" to practice the "R" sound. The rhymes can also help a student compare how the words may not look the same but are still homophonic.

Twinkle, twinkle little star,
How I wonder what you are.

Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.

These lyrics show how 'star' and 'are' rhyme and how 'high' and 'sky' rhyme but the words do not look the same. Songs and rhymes can also build vocabulary while using a form of TPR (Total Physical Response). Games like "The Hokey Pokey" and "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes", for example, teach the vocabulary for body parts.

Vocabulary and Language Development

The repetitive nature of most children's songs and rhymes help students learn vocabulary and the rhythm of the language. "Old MacDonald had a Farm" is an example of a song that repeats itself. The type of animal and the sound each animal makes changes but the rest of the lyrics remain the same. Anyone learning the song should be able to memorize the lyrics very quickly. To make a lesson more challenging, a copy of the song or rhyme with words missing can be given to the students. The song can be played and the students can fill in the missing words. This helps with listening comprehension, writing, reading and spelling. The words the instructor chooses to leave off the page may change depending on the lesson. If adjectives are the topic of a lesson, the adjectives may be left out of the song or rhyme so a student can fill them in when it is played for the class. The difficulty of the lesson can be changed by the type of song or rhyme chosen and that words are omitted.

The Value of Music

By using music in the ESL classroom, students practice their listening skills and increase their cultural knowledge. Almost any song can be used in the ESL classroom. Popular music can be employed in the same way as children's rhymes. The pronunciation and rhythm lessons are the same as for the children's songs and the lessons may help students become more interested in different types of music. Some ESL students shy away from the traditional popular music of a culture because it is difficult (often, even for the native speaker) for them to understand the words. Practicing lyric reading, studying the vocabulary, and listening to various songs can help students become more familiar with popular music and make them more confident in their ability to listen and understand the world around them. Traditional songs can also be used in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation exercises. Songs can also be used to start cultural lessons about particular historical events or traditions in an area of the world. The song, "Rocky Top", for example is a song about the Appalachian Mountains and the culture of that region. The song is very popular in Tennessee and was adopted as one of their five state songs according to www.tennessee.gov: The Official Web Site of the State of Tennessee. "Rocky Top" can be used to start a lesson on the different cultures found within the United States and their historical aspects. It may also open the door to vocabulary words such as "Ain't."

Creating Lessons with Music and Rhymes

The lessons on songs or rhymes are easy to create. Lyrics can be found on the Internet and sometimes on CD covers. Educational authors have seen the demand for rhyme-type lessons to build pronunciation and vocabulary skills and have published several books on the subject.

Tongue Twisters

Tongue twisters, which can sometimes fall into the category of rhymes, make great pronunciation exercises. If a student is having trouble pronouncing a specific sound, the sound can be isolated with a tongue twister and practiced. "She sells seashells by the seashore" is a good example of a tongue twister to practice the "S" sound. Many of the rhyming words in a tongue twister show how some words can sound the same but be spelled very differently. "Which witch wished which wish?" shows students that which and witch have similar pronunciations but are very different in meaning. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the pupil to use context clues to decide which witch is which. When the regular lesson is complete but there is still some time left at the end of class, tongue twisters can be a fun activity. They are also good for vocabulary lessons. "Peter Piper Picked a Peck of Pickled Peppers," for example, may prompt the reader to ask, 'What is a peck?' The answer is two gallons but new cultural information would not have been revealed if the tongue twister had not been used.

Fairy Tales in Daily Life

Watching the movie *Shrek* requires some background knowledge of traditional European fairy tales to understand all the jokes. While a non-native speaker of English might still enjoy the movie, it makes references to dozens of fairy tales including *Cinderella*, *Snow White* and *The Seven Dwarfs*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *The Gingerbread Man*, *Pinocchio*, *Goldilocks* and *The Three Bears*, and *Robin Hood*. Several other movies also make reference to *Cinderella* or other fairy tales. Popular music also has been influenced by fairy tales -- Sam the Sham's "Lil Red Riding Hood", John Michael Montgomery's "I Can Love You Like That," and Garth Brooks' "It's Midnight Cinderella" all have themes reflecting popular fairy tales.

Building Literacy Skills

Fairy tales and children's stories can create good introductions into more difficult reading and writing lessons. Rewriting the endings, reading aloud and acting out scenes from the stories are all good language skill builders. Some children's stories have alternate versions based on the original story that tell the story from a different point of view. The *True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, for example, is the story of the Three Little Pigs as told from the perspective of the Big Bad Wolf. The story portrays the wolf telling his side of the story, claiming himself as an innocent who just wanted a cup of sugar for his dear old granny's birthday cake. This story can be used to help students understand point of view, and they can practice their writing skills by choosing other children's stories to rewrite from a different perspective. Students can also bring in fairy tales or other stories from their own culture to share with the class. The stories shared by the ESL students may be similar to fairy tales found in the United States or may be very different. The story of *Cinderella* may be interpreted in many different parts of the world including Egypt, China, Vietnam and Korea but each version is different relative to the culture of the country in which it originated.

Conclusion

Fairy tales, nursery rhymes and songs are not just for children. They belong to the whole culture and are an integral part of society. Using them to teach ESL students can be fun and educational for everyone involved. Vocabulary, intonation patterns, sentence structure and many other things can be taught in addition to giving ESL students another way to understand the new culture in which they live. From preschool to adult education, fairy tales, nursery rhymes and songs are an asset to any ESL classroom.

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