

MUSIC AND VERSES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

Introduction

Music is a very important part of our daily life. We hear it wherever we are – at home or in church, in shops or in children’s playgrounds. Our feelings and thoughts are very often expressed through music.

Songs and rhymes for children exist in all cultures of the world. They are used to pass popular knowledge and beliefs from generation to generation. Children listen to them, learn from them and grow up with them. So it is not surprising that they can also be used as a useful resource in teaching English to young learners. They provide a relaxing atmosphere in the language classroom. In that enjoyable way children learn about the sounds and structures of English and expand their vocabulary. At the same time the children’s imagination and creativity are stimulated, and their motor coordination is improved, songs and rhymes are also a social activity which is very important to young children making them feel part of a group. It is also important for building up their confidence in the new language.

Songs and rhymes can also enrich presentation and revision of topics in various school subjects, simple mathematics included.

Selecting songs and rhymes

Each song or rhyme should meet certain criteria, so that instructional objectives and educational aims set beforehand can be fully achieved. These criteria are the following:

1. They must be relevant to young learners’ experience.
2. They must be interesting to young children.
3. The language used must be suited to the children’s level of knowledge; that is, structures should be simple and vocabulary should be relevant.
4. They must be meaningful.
5. Melodies must be easy to sing or not too difficult for young learners.
6. There should not be too many new language items (6 to 7 is enough at one time).
7. Recorded songs and rhymes must be clear for the learners to understand.
8. The same lines or refrains in songs are always welcome as they help memorizing.
9. The teacher should also like the song or rhyme.

The role of the teacher

There are certain demands on the teacher's work in the classroom. Satisfying them she makes children's learning easier and more successful. Here are some of them:

1. The children should understand what they are singing about, so the initial presentation is very important. The teacher can demonstrate a new language item by consciously drawing her learners' attention to it, or she can involve the learners in an activity during which she introduces a new item.
2. To support learners' understanding of a new language item in a song visual aids, actions and realia should be used.
3. The teacher is the best visual support for a song or rhyme as children find it easier to join in when they can watch someone mouthing or singing the words.
4. Using mime and gestures help the children understand new words and recognise old ones without resorting to the mother tongue.
5. The teacher must feel free to modify any parts of the song or rhyme which would puzzle the learner.
6. The teacher should never try to explain language rules to very young learners.
7. Songs and rhymes should be performed a few times before the learners are asked to join in.
8. Teaching songs a line at a time ruins spontaneity and must be avoided.
9. If the teacher or any of her pupils can play an instrument, it can be used in the song sessions.
10. The teacher can create her own cassette recordings with sound effects for rain, thunder, fire, a train, a plane, footsteps, hoofbeats and so on.

Extralinguistic uses of songs and rhymes

When English is taught and learnt as a foreign language, young children do not normally have the opportunity to absorb it in the same way as their mother tongue by listening to those around them. The exposure to the foreign language is also different to that of their mother tongue. As children often learn by repeating the same language content, songs and rhymes have a useful part to play in language teaching. While drills make lessons boring, favourite songs and rhymes bring equal enjoyment to the foreign language classroom whenever they are repeated.

Songs and rhymes foster feelings of security and self-confidence in the new language.

They contribute to the development of the children's sense of rhythm and musicality.

They can reinforce language already learnt.

In the world of the children listening to songs and rhymes is a realistic/authentic activity.

They can provide an enjoyable change of the classroom routine.

At the beginner level singing a song or reciting a rhyme gives the learner the satisfaction of using the language continuously.

The children are encouraged to take their English outside the classroom and so indirectly they are thinking about English.

New words are introduced in context and easier to understand.

The verses are used for introducing the learners to the idea of stressed and unstressed syllables. By putting the stress in the right places, the learners create a natural flow of language and build up fluency.

If songs and rhymes are well taught, they are a great memory aid. They are easily retained and evoked, and because of that are used as a gentle way of reminding the children of certain language items that may not have been used in the class for some time.

Many of them lend themselves to mime, acting, and possess special advantages as practice material, so they provide a valuable addition to any course.

They are ideal for a concert of English songs and rhymes performed by the children before their parents or other classes.

Linguistic uses of songs and rhymes

Songs and rhymes may be used for various purposes in the young learners classrooms. Here are some of them:

1. to practise pronunciation the teacher chooses songs and rhymes that include particular sounds, especially those that do not exist in the children's language;
2. to practise stress and rhythmic patterns, and intonation;
3. to introduce new language;
4. to practise vocabulary and to revise it;
5. to practise grammatical structures;
6. to introduce and practise conversational exchanges;
7. to begin, extend or end a topic;
8. to practise all four language skills
 - a) - listening for specific information,
 - jigsaw listening and predicting what is going to happen or guessing what has already happened,
 - b) - saying the rhymes,
 - singing the songs,

- telling a story that could surround the song or rhyme,
- role-playing,
- c) - reading texts of the songs and rhymes that children learnt orally,
- reading mixed-up individual lines of the song or rhyme and arranging them in the correct order,
- d) - writing as in copying texts of the short and simple songs and rhymes,
- gap-filling with the missing words,
- creating and writing new verses.

A special use: simple mathematics

If we want to teach a foreign language in terms of the child's educational needs and interests, it cannot be taught as an isolated subject. Here is how simple mathematics can be taught in English. Songs and rhymes are great helpers again.

Before starting teaching mathematics to young learners, there are two questions that should be answered:

1. Do the children possess the concept of numbers in their mother tongue?
2. What materials and objects can a teacher use to teach that concept in English and help her students' understanding?

The first answer is: A class teacher can give all the necessary information to a foreign language teacher on what her children already know, and when and to what depth they are to learn about numbers, counting, adding and subtracting. The second answer is: It is best to start teaching numbers by using children's own fingers (and toes), because the body is one of the most familiar "objects" for young children. Some other useful small objects for counting and other activities are buttons, wrapped sweets, small stones, marbles, coloured pencils, beads, toy cards. There are also songs and rhymes, alongside various number games, that are very useful for all the afore-mentioned reasons. They make learning more interesting and enjoyable and help the children use the numbers more fluently.

At the end of the first school year the pupils are expected:

1. to count successfully up to 20,
2. to recognize numbers even if they are presented out of their usual order,
3. to solve simple arithmetical problems of addition and subtraction by working on their own,
4. to read the words for numbers,
5. to pronounce numbers correctly.

If these tasks are to be achieved in a meaningful context and in order of increasing difficulty, with the teacher's constant positive attitude and the children's happy faces, songs and rhymes must certainly be used in the young learners classrooms.

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