

Enabling Japanese Students to Identify and Write Rhymes

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Abstract

Learning language is a process that begins at birth. The process includes children listening to the people near them and then later imitating the sounds they hear. Talking, singing songs and reciting poems to babies and toddlers are another part of the process. Parents read stories to their children and many of those stories include rhyming words. Many children learn rhymes by hearing them again and again. Hearing, repeating and memorizing rhymes also are part of language learning. It is the goal of this paper to examine certain components of rhymes, aspects of children learning rhymes and the benefit of teaching rhymes to Japanese college students.

There are many aspects of rhymes and their use in language learning and poetry. This paper will not delve into all the components such as iambic pentameter and syllable counts. Instead I am interested in emphasizing the use of rhymes in children's language acquisition and ways to introduce rhymes in the Japanese classroom.

There are many benefits to having children learn rhymes. For example, Schecter (2008) writes, "The musical rhythms and predictability of nursery rhymes make them perfect for helping children focus on different phonics skills." Not only do these rhythms and rhymes help children with reading later on, but they help with spoken language as well. According to Kirtley (1999),

Speaking, and listening to rhymes and alliterative language play an important role in the initial development of a child's awareness of sounds. Through these activities

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children become aware of the larger more accessible units of sound in spoken language, such as the word and syllable. They also become aware of the most accessible units of sound within the word, the 'onset' and the 'rime'. (p. 16)

Onset refers to the initial sound before the vowel. The rime is the vowel and any following consonants. When children can identify onsets and rimes, they are closer to being able to identify the phonemes in a word (Kirtely, p. 16). By introducing my students to English onset and rime, and by saying rhymes in class, I hope to make students more aware of English pronunciation.

Children in many different countries and cultures learn rhymes while they are growing up. Opitz (2000, p. 11) writes "Children appear to hear rhyming words and words that begin the same first." Rhymes are one way that children learn to distinguish sounds in their native language, but they are told to children for different reasons. The reasons why parents say rhymes to their children include: rhymes are fun and easy to remember; they are culturally important; adults may associate the rhymes with pleasant childhood memories; and children like to learn them. Children are delighted in the rhyming, rhythm and familiarity of nursery rhymes. (Decastro & Kern, 2000, p. 3). Whatever the reason, most children learn simple rhymes from a young age. Many of these rhymes stay with them into adulthood and they then share them with their children. It is all part of the process of learning language. While people from many cultures remember learning rhymes during their childhood, Japanese children do not learn them. They do learn childhood songs and poems, but not ones involving rhyming words. Because Japanese do not hear rhymes from a young age, teachers who are interested in using them in their English classes need to teach the basics of rhymes before attempting any writing activities with them.

It is not only young children who learn and say rhymes. There are books written for older children or young adults to integrate nursery rhymes into the study of math, science, reading or writing. For example, *Teaching Math*

and Science Through Nursery Rhymes was designed for teachers who struggle meeting math and science standards and would like to integrate the book into their language arts program. (Decastro & Kern, p. 3). Also there are books for students wishing to improve their vocabulary. Rhymes are often viewed as fun or not serious, but in one SAT preparation book, rhymes are used to help students remember difficult words. “This book doesn’t try to shove dictionary-style definitions down your throat; instead, it presents the words within smart-aleck rhymes.” (Fodor, 2009, p. v). And learning rhymes is also an excellent idea for college students learning English. “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.” (Brown. p. 1).

If a teacher is interested in the subject matter, then teaching it will become a pleasure instead of a chore. I enjoy reading poems with rhyming words. When I was a graduate student, a friend introduced me to *The Best of Robert Service* (1953). I enjoyed his stories of the Yukon told in rhyming verse. I wanted to share that love of rhymes with my college students and I developed two different activities to do it. The first was to have students practice a children’s rhyme as a warm-up drill. The second was to have students write the final line to a rhyme. But before presenting these two activities to students, I had to first prepare them by teaching the basics of rhyming words.

Background knowledge is important. “All readers apply what they know about the world to make sense of what they read. ELLs often lack the background needed to make sense of texts written in English because authors of these texts assume their readers all share certain cultural knowledge.” (Freeman & Freeman, 2007, p. 124). Just as reading in a foreign language requires background knowledge, many other activities in the ESL classroom also require it. Japanese college students do not know what rhymes are. Therefore an explanation of rhyming words and where they are found is necessary.

The first step I use in my class is to explain what a rhyme is and write many examples on the board. I often start off with the word “blue” and then under that I write: true, you, to, new, dew, screw and due. I explain that it is the same vowel *sound* at the end of two words that makes a rhyme and not the spelling of the word. I also explain that rhyming words are often placed at the end of the line and that spelling does not matter. I then hand out a children’s counting rhyme. The rhyme that I use is:

One two three four five.

Once I caught a fish alive .

Six seven eight nine ten.

Then I threw it back again.

Why did you let it go?

Because it bit my finger so.

Which finger did it bite?

This little finger on my right. (Litchfield & Allen, pp.1-2)

I explain that this rhyme is to help children learn their numbers. I tell them that I often said this rhyme to my son when he was getting his teeth brushed. I ask students to identify the rhyming words. At first, many of the students cannot find the rhyming words, so I repeat the basics: same sound at the end of the word, spelling does not matter and the location is often at the end of the line. After reviewing those three characteristics, the students catch on. Once they have identified the rhyming words, I model it several times and have students repeat it. I meet students once a week for approximately fifteen weeks and I use this short rhyme as a warm-up activity. In addition to just saying the rhyme, I give students the gestures that go with it as a memory aid. After saying this once or twice each week at the beginning of class, I give them a chance to say it before their mid-term test for extra credit. This past July, out of more than four hundred students, only five students did not try it. I think it was because we had practiced it sufficiently in class, it was easy to remember because of the rhyming words and gestures, and because they had fun saying it.

In the second or third class of the semester I review what rhyming words are and then hand out a poem which I have written about being a first year student. The rhyme consists of two stanzas with four lines in each stanza. The last line of each stanza is blank. The poem is:

I am a new student

in a new place

I will work hard

There are many new students

Just like me

I will make new friends

Under the poem is a list of 19 rhyming words for “place” and nineteen for “me” for the students to choose from. I tell the students what the main idea is and then I give examples of incorrect answers and the reasons why they are incorrect. I do not want to give them examples of correct answers because they will use my examples instead of creating their own. The students are instructed to read the word list at the bottom. They may use any of the words on the list. If they do not know the meaning of the words, they are told to use a dictionary. After my explanation I give the students time in class to try to write a sentence or a phrase that is related to the main idea and has a rhyming word at the end of the line. I walk around the class and make sure students understand the assignment and check the ones who have written their rhyme. I tell those students who have not finished the assignment to complete it for homework. I have students write rhymes later in the semester as well. They find rhyming words for poems about snow in spring, about spring vacation and about cold weather in October. I am always amazed at the results. My students are not English majors, but they write

very clever, humorous sentences. These activities lead to genuine engagement with English and I hope will offer students new avenues of appreciation of literature and for self expression.

Below are two examples of students' poems:

I am a new student

in a new place

I will work hard

at my own pace.

There are many new students

Just like me

I will make new friends

They may be dopey.

Learning English rhymes helps children identify sounds and later can help with identifying phonemes. Though many cultures have a rhyming tradition and rhyming words in their language, some do not. Japanese is one language that does not have rhymes. Because of this, Japanese are not familiar with the idea of rhyming words or their location in a poem. The author has successfully used rhymes in the college classroom in Japan for both oral presentations and writing assignments. The author would highly recommend using rhymes in the classroom since they have proven to be very enjoyable for students and will hopefully improve their pronunciations skills.

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