

## TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR TO YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH NURSERY RHYMES APPLICATIONS

Annisaa Paradisa  
Universitas Indonesia  
Indonesia  
[annisaa.paradisa@gmail.com](mailto:annisaa.paradisa@gmail.com)

### Abstract

In this technological era, young learners are exposed to various kinds of technologies. This phenomenon has led young learners' interest in learning through technology rather than conventional teaching. Addressing to this context, Nursery Rhymes applications exist to facilitate the wants and necessity to learn in young learners. Nursery rhymes teaches grammar, word order, vocabulary, rhythm and pronunciation altogether. There are claims that young learners have short attention span. Hence, these applications provide tools that attracts young learners' attention as supporting media for teachers. The sample consists of three young learners age 6 to 7-year-olds. The result of this two week study shows that the students have better attention and willingness to learn English grammar. Undoubtedly, this will also lead to the progress of their grammar use.

**Keywords :** nursery rhymes application, grammar teaching, young learners

### Introduction

GRAMMAR. What would be the first thing that comes into your mind when you hear that word? Pretty sure most of you would imagine a set of rules or restrictions in language use. This would then lead to the thought of boring lessons of teachers explaining the rules followed by grammar drilling. Some might think grammar as unimportant and discouraging. However, grammar is not meant to discourage learners from learning a language, but as Widdowson (1990) and Cullen (2008) would say "a liberating force". Grammar is taught to help learners to form sentences that could convey their message clearly. Therefore, grammar is taught since early school age to enable young learners to express themselves clearly too.

However, teaching grammar to young EFL learners can be challenging. Children are physically active, imaginative, easily distracted and have short attention span (Shin and Crandall, 2014). Explaining grammar rules elaborately to young learners and giving written practices that engages no imagination might bore them. In addition, the practices that are involved usually stay in the classroom without the learners

actually practicing or using it again outside the classroom. Therefore, in this case, nursery rhymes could be incorporated as a tool for teaching grammar to young learners.

Nursery rhymes are simple traditional songs or poems for children. They contain word order and grammatical sentences that children can learn from. Prosic-Santovac(2015) pointed out that nursery rhymes abound in partial repetition at the linguistic level, with 'many repetitions of word sequences containing slight variations, which from the child's point of view, may aid the perception of abstract linguistic categories' (Crystal, 2001) and language patterns (Gordon, 2007). Most nursery rhymes are short, repetitive and rhythmic. This helps children recall what they have learned easily. Through nursery rhymes, children will seamlessly acquire grammar (Pinter, 2006) and functional chunks (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010). As Shweta (2013) pointed out that the foundations of grammar can be internalized unconsciously in their learning patterns, although young learners do not realize the importance or need for grammar in a language.

Young learners' interest in learning a language can be gained by incorporating technology. Nursery rhymes can be taught through computers, cellphones or tablets. There are plenty of nursery rhymes applications that teachers can use as a teaching aid in introducing the nursery rhymes. These applications provide a wide range of nursery rhymes videos containing lyrics that children can sing along to. Animated videos provide visual aids to children to help them understand words that are abstract. Hence, the usage of nursery rhymes applications will help create a more enjoyable atmosphere for the children to learn grammar.

### **Methodology**

This small-scaled descriptive study presents an attempt to teach young learners English grammar through nursery rhymes applications.

### **1. Participants**

This study involved one 6-year-old who was a grade 1 student and two 7-year-olds who were grade 2 students. The students were private tutoring students whom each studied for an hour, twice a week.

### **2. Limitation**

This brief study was conducted only for two weeks. For the 6-year-old student, the grammar focus were limited to teaching subject-verb agreement, plural-singular nouns, adjectives and possessive nouns. Meanwhile, the grammar focus taught to the 7-year-olds were limited to present and past tense (simple and progressive form). The grammar was taught with the aim of the student in raising awareness in their grammar use.

### **3. Data collection procedures and instrument**

In conducting this study, data were collected through oral and written pre-test and post-test. The pre-test and post-test for the 6-year-old student was a short-answer test. Meanwhile, the pre-test and post-test

for the 7-year-old students were telling a short story and short-answer test. These tests were audio recorded. After the pre-test, the treatment was given for 4 meetings.

### **4. Task-design**

The students were shown one or two nursery rhymes from either the computer or the cellphone. Then, they were asked to sing along to the rhymes so they become familiar with the song. The teacher explained briefly about the grammar that they were going to learn. The students will practice the grammar points orally or written through the nursery rhymes.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The pre-test was not given to find the score of the students but for the writer to analyze and describe their grammar use before the treatment was given. The 6-year-old student was given a Short Answer oral assessment based on pictures that the writer showed. The purpose was for the writer to analyze the student's awareness in her use of subject-verb agreement and singular-plural nouns. The written test was given to analyze her ability to identify adjectives and nouns as well as her understanding in the subject-verb agreement, singular-plural nouns and possessive nouns. All the grammar points being tested had been taught to her at her school. Thus, this pre-test is given to confirm whether the grammar points had been achieved or not.

Her oral test showed that she was still inconsistent in her grammar use of subject-verb agreement and singular-plural nouns. The following is the example of her responses extracted from the oral test.

R = researcher, S = student

R : ...(Showing a picture of three cats) How many cats do you see here?

S : Three little cats

R : ...(Showing a rhino picture) how many rhino do you see here?

S : **One rhino**



R : Now here...(showing a picture of two rhinos)

S : **Two...umm...two rhino**

R : And then...in this picture (Showing a picture of four elephants)?

S : **Four...four elephant**

R : How many boys do you see here?

S : Two boys

R : Okay...now how many boys do you see here?

S : **Umm...one boys.**

R : (Showing a picture of girls playing a ball) What are these girls doing?

S : **She is playing** with a ball.

R : What are these boys doing?

S : the **boys is** eating ice cream

Her written pre-test also showed that she required more practice in the grammar points being tested.

Meanwhile, the 7-year-old students received a different pre-test. The grammar point being tested is the past simple tense as the purpose is mainly testing their past simple tense use in telling and writing narrative story. However, simple present tense was also taught as a comparison to the use of past simple tense. Table 1 shows the verbs used in the students' oral story test. Table 2 shows the verbs used in their written story test.

Table 1. Verbs used in the oral pre-test

|           | Present Tense   | Past Tense   |
|-----------|---|--|
| Student 1 | celebrate, is trying, try, find, look, run away, keep, disappear, tell, doesn't, keep, don't, go, give. | was trying, saw, looked up, was going, said, saw, were, was shrinking. |
| Student 2 | is, is walking, see, want, say, ask, show, take, is showing, jump, run away                             | was, didn't know   |

Table 2. Verbs used in the written pre-test

|           | Present Tense                             | Past Tense                           |
|-----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Student 1 | swim, try, bite, bring, take, tell, save. | was walking, said, was, decided, did |
| Student 2 | Is, think, talk, say, call, count, land   | was, didn't know                     |

Both table 1 and 2, shows that both students are still mainly use the present simple form compared to past simple form in writing a narrative story regardless that they had been taught to use simple past tense in writing narrative story.

The treatment was then given for 4 meetings. The procedure for both the 6-year-old student and the 7-year-old students were similar. The grammar points being taught are adjusted to their needs and the aim of the study. The students were introduced to the nursery rhymes at the beginning of the lesson. Then they were then asked to sing along to the song a couple of times. To make the activities more interactive, the writer asked the students to answer the questions based on the nursery rhymes or retell the nursery rhymes so they have the chance to practice grammar use orally for the writer to observe. Students were also asked to replace the words with new nouns, adjectives or tenses to practice their grammar understanding. Worksheets were also given at the end of the lessons. The nursery rhymes taught at the first meeting were asked to be repeated at the next meeting before a new rhyme is being introduced.

At the first two meetings, the progress was not visible as the students were still adjusting to memorizing the nursery rhymes. However, some progress was shown at the last two meetings as the repeated sentences in the nursery rhymes do help them recall what was taught at the

previous lessons. When given a corrective feedback, the students were quite aware of what their mistake was.

The post-test given was similar to the pre-test. The following is the extract of the oral post-test of the 6-year-old student.

R = researcher, S = student  
 R : (Showing a picture of some monkeys)  
 How many monkeys do you see in the picture?  
 S : two monkeys  
 R : Ok...(Showing a picture of three cats) How many lions do you see here?  
 S : four lions  
 R : how many mouse do you see?  
 S : **two mouse**  
 R : Two mouse? If it is more than one mouse, it becomes...  
 S : Mice  
 R : So?  
 S : Two mice  
 R : Now, how about this one? (showing a picture of six kittens)  
 S : Ooh...cute...six kittens  
 R : What is this man doing? (Showing a man swimming)  
 S : He is swimming.  
 R : What are these girls doing? (Girls playing a ball)  
 S : She **is playing** ball.  
 R : How many girls do you see here?  
 S : (Counting) Five girls.  
 R : So, if it is five girls...does it become she or they?  
 S : Oh, they are playing the ball.  
 R : Okay...What are this woman and her daughter doing?  
 S: The woman and the daughter **is cooking**.  
 R : The woman and the daughter means there is one person or more than one person?  
 S : More than one.  
 R : So that means...  
 S : The woman and the daughter are cooking.  
 R : Good job...What are these boys doing?  
 S : The boys are playing football.  
 R : How about...this lion?  
 S : the lion is sleeping.

The post-test of the 6-year-old students. Some progress was shown. She showed lesser mistake in the subject-object agreements as well as the singular-plural noun. She was able to correct mistake in grammar use too. Her written post-test

showed that she was able to identify the nouns and adjectives better. She also started to recognize the subject-verb and singular-plural nouns.

The progress made by the 7-year-old students in using the correct grammar use in narrative story is shown in tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Verbs used in the oral post-test

|           | Present Tense                  | Past Tense  |
|-----------|--------------------------------|---|
| Student 1 | cannot, is, climb, hide, sleep | got, went, saw, came, sat, played, said, tried, ran away, cut, fell |
| Student 2 | hatch, hide, become, call      | was, wanted, said, stayed, saw, went                                |

Table 4. Verbs used in the written post-test

|           | Present Tense                | Past Tense   |
|-----------|------------------------------|--|
| Student 1 | leave, is, knock, try, feel, | Were, went, was, saw, said, ate, came, were, found, ran away |
| Student 2 | Wakes up, catch, laugh, bite | was, came, bumped, became, said, let, could                  |

The results of the post-test in both oral and written form showed that they used the past tense form more than the present tense. Although the progress was not significant, it did show that the students made a progress using this teaching technique. It needed to be reminded that this was a brief study. The treatment was given for only a short period of time. The nursery rhymes are required to be taught consistently for the grammar to become internalized.

Meanwhile, the reaction towards the activity were positive. The students enjoyed having a technology being incorporated into their lessons. The

singing made them more relaxed at learning the grammar and they seemed less bored in learning compared to having a whole hour of paper and pencil activity.

This study was done on only 3 participants and done for a brief period. For further study, the writer suggests it to be done in a classroom situation and a longer period as the results may vary.

### Conclusion

Nursery rhymes can be used as a tool for teaching grammar to young learners. Nursery rhymes applications provide various nursery rhymes that can be accessed by teachers and used as visual aid. The presence of technology in teaching and learning process sparks the children's interest in learning. It makes learning grammar more enjoyable for them. The study showed that nursery rhymes could lead some progress in children's grammar use. However, like any other teaching technique, learning grammar through nursery rhymes is not an overnight solution for children to internalize grammar. It required consistent exposure and practice of nursery rhymes to help children internalize grammar. That is where the nursery rhymes applications become beneficial. The students could still listen to and sing along to the nursery rhymes outside the classroom. They are able to practice the grammar unconsciously through repetitive sentences in the nursery rhymes.

In conclusion, the writer hopes that this study can help provide ideas or teaching alternatives in teaching grammar to young learners.

### Reference

- Curtain, H. & Dahlberg, C. A. (2010). *Languages and Children – Making the Match: New Languages for Young Learners, Grades K–8 (4th ed.)*. Boston, New York: Pearson.
- Crystal, D. (2001). *Language Play*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

- Gordon, T. (2007). *Teaching Young Children a Second Language*. Westport: Praeger.
- Nunan, D. (2011). *Teaching Language to Young Learners*. Anaheim: Anaheim University Press.
- Pinter, A. (2006). *Teaching Young Language Learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prosic-Santovac, D. (2015). Making the Match: Traditional Nursery Rhymes and Teaching English to Modern Children. *CLELE journal*. ISSN 2195-5212 Vol. 3 Issue 1. 25-48
- Shin, J. K., & Crandall, J. (2014). *Teaching Young Learners English: From Theory to Practice*. Boston: National Geographic Learning.
- Cullen, R. (2008). Teaching grammar as a liberating Force. *ELT Journal*. Vol. 62. 772-780.
- Shweta, R. (2013). Nursery Rhymes as an Effective Instructional Material for Young Language Learners. *ELT Journal*. ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13. 772-780.
- Widdowson, H. (1990). *Aspects of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.