

Rhyme and Rhythm: The Input of Nursery Rhymes and Metered Verse into the EFL Curriculum

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Introduction

It has already been argued that the input of metered and/or rhymed verse mainly in the form of ‘nursery rhymes’ is a desideratum for three basic reasons (Gledhill: 2007). Firstly, rhythmic speech facilitates the inclusion of supra-segmental features such as weakening, elision, assimilation, linking and pitch prominence subliminally into the speech of young L2 learners; secondly, owing to the release of opioid polypeptides which occurs in rhythmic language (Pöppel & Turner 2001: 4), a highly motivating kalogenetic effect is produced in the brain and thirdly, it has also been shown (Pöppel & Turner, 2001: 19) that rhythmic language causes both hemispheres to interact in such a way that the cognitive functions are enhanced which results in improved memory of the linguistic input. It will be further argued in this paper that nursery rhymes are an excellent way to obtain a feeling for English rhythms in the L2 curriculum. Ilčiukienė (2006) rightly identifies the importance of intonation and other supra-segmental features in EFL and justifiably bewails the lack of attention in the TEFL literature which has been given to this field.

One of the problems with the whole area of rhythm has been a lack of consensus at both the theoretical and empirical levels. Empirical studies on rhythm such as Cummins (2002) is highly critical the time-honoured categorisation of English as a stress-timed language as introduced by Abercrombie (1967). Cummins’s (2002) summary of the situation still applies today:

But nowhere has the effort at establishing and defending a prosodic taxonomy had a harder time than in the domain of ‘rhythm’. Without doubt, much of this lack of progress can be traced to differing interpretations of the term ‘rhythm’. Cummins, F. (2002:1)

Later empirical studies such as Cummins (2005), however, still use the traditional prosodic categories such as iambs and trochees and this paper will work within these categories for convenience.

Rhythm continues to be a basic experience of L1 language users even from infancy as argued by Mehler et al., (1988 and 1996), based on empirical studies with infants. Despite the lack of consensus at the theoretical level and despite numerous inconclusive empirical studies, L2 learners need to be exposed to English rhythms if they are to gain naturalness and fluency in speaking English as has already been argued (Ilčiukienė 2006).

In a paper with its main emphasis on pedagogical aspects, the EFL or the primary school teacher has to start somewhere and this ‘somewhere’ could have no better a starting point than nursery rhymes. This is a genre which should not be underestimated, as maintained by the poet Robert

Graves: 'The best of the older ones are nearer to poetry than the greater part of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*.' (Opie & Opie, 1997: 2).

Basic English rhythms as exemplified by selected nursery rhymes will be analysed in this paper for their rhythmic and supra-segmental features with a view to practical input in the classroom. Although this paper is not an empirical study, it is to be hoped that some of the insights arising out of the analysis can be put to an empirical test for teachers or researchers who have access to a suitable sample of primary school pupils or EFL students.

Aim of the research

Many studies including Mehler et al. and (Pöppel & Turner, 2001) as already referred to stress the fundamental role rhythm has in our perception of language. Indeed, this is the basic argument throughout the enormous (Pöppel & Turner, 2001) project which studied rhythm across languages in four continents. As Schreuder (2006) argues, rhythm is a very basic aspect of human activity:

Rhythm is everywhere, in the world within us and in the world around us. Rhythm is in our heartbeat, our breathing, and our stride, but also in the tides of the sea, the seasons and the movements of the earth itself. These are all movements in a rhythmic fashion. It turns out to be really hard to do things non-rhythmically: when people are asked to tap their fingers on the table irregularly, some recurrent pattern will appear (Fraisse 1982). This all suggests that rhythm is at the heart of nature, at least, in natural events in which time, movement, or visual patterns are involved. Language and music are just two of these rhythmical behaviours. (Schreuder 2006: 33-34)

Within this framework, it is interesting to look at English rhythms. Attridge (1995: 4) convincingly links the rhythms of English poetry to the distinctive rhythms of the spoken language. Although a taxonomy of English rhythms is still a long way from realisation, despite Cummins's scepticism (2002), it is relatively uncontroversial that English is very much a stress-timed language and it can be argued further that English 'likes' clearly patterned rhythms with strong contrasts. It is indeed difficult for native speakers to speak unrhythmically. To illustrate this point I composed two shopping lists for a fictitious scenario where two middle class campers used to socialising make a list of their requirements for a few days. One list was composed as rhythmically as possible and the other as unrhythmically and counter-intuitively as possible. There is also an unavoidable, interfering semantic element in this example. For whatever reasons, partly semantic and partly rhythmically, English speakers tend to say 'bread and butter' rather than 'butter and bread' and 'salt and pepper' rather than 'pepper and salt' and certainly not 'pepper, bread, butter and salt'. The rhythmic list was so easy to compile that it easily 'slipped' into a 'poem' or 'jazz chant':

The Rhythmic Shopping List

Bread and butter
Salt and pepper
Tomatoes
Potatoes
Cheese, peas, beans;
Paprika, garlic and cucumber too.

Don't the forget the ice
Nor the coffee and the tea;
Orange juice and mineral water

Booze, whisky, beer.
 Red wine, white wine
 Tonic, gin and ginger ale,
 A plastic bag for the rubbish bin
 And a cardboard box
 To put 'em all in

On the other hand, the non-rhythmical and semantically counter-intuitive list was much more difficult to compose and had to be done mechanically:

The Non-rhythmic Shopping List

Cucumber, white wine, bread, gin, cheese, orange juice, salt, beer, paprika, ice, red wine, rubbish bin, pepper, booze, ginger ale, cardboard box, butter, mineral water, potatoes, coffee, whisky, peas, tea and garlic

There are implications for the L2 teacher in these examples. An interesting classroom experiment could be to teach two lists to two different groups with more or less identical semantic information, one using a rhythmic list and another using a counter-intuitive non-rhythmic list. It is fairly obvious for the theoretical reasons already given that rhythmic learning would be more successful, but it would be interesting to see how statistically significant the differences would be. It is already the case that the students studying to be primary school teachers at the University of Erfurt are encouraged to use and to create semantic fields in a rhythmic form such as a song or a poem to facilitate effective and enjoyable language for their primary school pupils.

Object of the research

A selection of ?? nursery rhymes selected for their phonological features with regard to EFL.

Methods

It will be seen from the small selection of nursery rhymes that certain rhythmic features predominate: regular stress patterns, contrast (fast/slow/iamb/trochee/) and varying degrees of pitch prominence. The first verse of the well-known rhyme *Mary had a little lamb* is a good example of a rhyme with regularity and contrast and which is why it (rightly) so often quoted in the literature concerning rhythm. Using conventional metrical markings within prosody ((v) = de-stress/(-) = stress), it can be seen that a line of regular trochees contrasts alternately with a line of iambs:

1	2	3	4
/ -	v / -	v / -	v / - (v)
Mary had a little lamb			
1	2	3	
/ v	- / v	- / v	- /
Its fleece was white as snow			
(0)	1	2	3 4
(v)	/ -	v / -	v / - (v)
(And) everywhere that Mary went			
1	2	3	
/ v	- / v	- / v	- /
The lamb was sure to go			

The rhythms are more or less perfect and so well known that in present writer's experience, the rhythms alone can be chanted (with pitch prominence) and most native speakers will be able to

recognise the nursery rhyme. Indeed, there is a game in which rhythms alone are tapped out and players recognise either a well-known rhyme or tune from the rhythm alone. The present writer put some words chosen deliberately to be as bland and banal as possible to the same metrical structure as below:

1 2 3 4
 / - v / - v / - v / - (v)

Daddy's bought a super bike

1 2 3
 / v - / v - / v - /

It's almost good as new

1 2 3 4
 / - v / - v / - v / - (v)

Fifty pounds is all it cost

1 2 3
 / v - / v - / v - /

A bargain through and through

Then slight changes were made the rhythm which, when recited, caused an immediate outrageous response to the effect that people retorted: 'No, that's wrong!' This area would, of course, need some empirical testing among a wide selection of native speakers. It is interesting in this context that if one takes a broad selection of nursery rhymes the most standard of which is probably *The Puffin Book of Nursery Rhymes* (Opie & Opie 1963), the nursery rhymes which have stood the test nearly all have rhythmically pleasing features as with the above example. To prove this would demand a whole paper. Such a paper might, however, be very interesting as a starting point for establishing a taxonomy of English rhythms. To illustrate this, two examples are given below:

Example 1:

My maid Mary

She minds her dairy

While I go a-hoeing and mowing each morn;

Merrily run the wheel

And the little spinning wheel,

Whilst I am singing and mowing my corn.

Example 2:

When good King Arthur ruled this land,

He was a goodly king

He stole three pecks of barley meal

To make a bag-pudding.

In *Example 1*, the first three lines scan perfectly well whereas the last three do not work, particularly the last line which is a key syllable short. If the last line were to be *Whilst I am a-*

x

x

x x

Jack built.

The new information, the *rat*, needs the greatest stress (four levels) followed by the opening head *this* and the final emphasis on *Jack* on whom not just the house but the whole poem itself rests (thus three level), the content words need some accenting (two levels) to contrast with the function words and weak forms which need to be unaccented (one level). If the poem is read aloud according to the above schema for accenting, then very clear English rhythms emerge. It has also been my experience that adult L2 learners enjoy reciting this poem in the language laboratory and all the students seem to have no difficulty in picking up these English rhythms.

- (i) Analysis of nursery rhymes via broad transcription, but highlighting supra-segmental features such as weakening, elision and assimilation
- (ii) Rhythmic analysis according to pitch prominence and metrical variation
- (iii) Melodic analysis using a three-tone scale for the spoken language

Results of the research

A taxonomy of selected nursery rhymes for classroom use

Conclusions

The same principles can apply to other nursery rhymes and similar forms of metered verse. More research is needed to establish a comprehensive or at least thorough taxonomy of English rhythms. Nursery rhymes form a good starting point for a systematic study of English rhythms.

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