
Rhyme, Rhythm and Reading: Phonological Awareness through Early Childhood Verses

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Abstract

The relationship between phonological awareness and early literacy has long been established in child language development research. Among the various strategies to foster this awareness, nursery rhymes stand out for their accessibility and educational value. Children who are exposed to rhyming structures before entering formal schooling tend to develop an intuitive understanding of sound-spelling relationships, allowing them to decode unfamiliar words more effectively. This paper examines how rhythmic language, embedded in kindergarten rhymes, supports the development of reading readiness and psychological well-being in preschool-aged learners. It synthesises research findings on the cognitive, linguistic and affective advantages of integrating nursery rhymes into early language pedagogy, especially in multilingual and EFL contexts.

Keywords: Phonological Awareness – Early Literacy – Nursery Rhymes – Kindergarten – Language Development – EFL Learners – Preschool Education – Psychological Benefits

Introduction

Introducing a second language to preschoolers presents unique challenges, particularly when the target language – such as English – features irregular phoneme-grapheme mappings. At ages three to six, many children are just becoming fluent in their first language. Adding English into this developmental window can feel demanding without age-appropriate methodologies. Yet, research shows that young learners are remarkably adept at acquiring new sounds and structures when exposed to rich and repetitive auditory input (Kuhl 831).

Rather than relying solely on direct instruction in letter names and phonics, educators employ nursery rhymes to create immersive, low-pressure learning environments. These

rhymes, often accompanied by rhythm, music and movement, provide a natural platform for introducing the phonological patterns of English. Their repetitive cadence aligns with children's cognitive rhythms, making them ideally suited for early language instruction (Goswami).

Nursery rhymes serve as more than entertainment – they are sophisticated tools that bridge the gap between children's natural language development and formal reading instruction. In today's classrooms, where teachers seek evidence-based methods, nursery rhymes offer a unique combination of proven effectiveness and practical accessibility. They work because they create positive, enjoyable associations with language learning from the very beginning.

The fact that every culture has developed rhythmic verses for children suggests something fundamental about how young minds process language. Nursery rhymes tap into children's natural ability to recognise patterns, helping them develop an awareness of how language works and this will benefit them throughout their education.

While often dismissed as simple entertainment, nursery rhymes have historical and cultural depth. Though many evolved from centuries-old oral traditions and may carry darker meanings – such as “Ring a Ring o’ Roses” referencing the Great Plague in Britain – modern adaptations focus on linguistic play rather than historical context. What remains vital is the rhyme's structure: patterned sounds, predictable endings and rhythmic stress – all of which contribute to phonological sensitivity in young learners.

Literature Review

Research consistently underscores the link between phonological awareness and literacy acquisition. According to Lonigan and Shanahan, the ability to identify and generate rhymes is a foundational subskill of early reading and one of the earliest to emerge in the phonological development continuum (306). Children who can distinguish rhyming words typically perform better in reading assessments, even after accounting for variables like socio-economic background or general cognitive ability.

Strickland and Schickedanz explain that repetitive rhyme exposure enhances a child's sensitivity to individual phonemes – the smallest units of sound in spoken language – by helping them mentally segment and manipulate these sounds (19). This segmentation skill is crucial for developing phonemic awareness, which Schatschneider et al. identify as one of the strongest predictors of reading success (853). The meta-analytic review conducted by these researchers across multiple studies confirms that phonological awareness training, particularly through rhyming activities, yields significant improvements in early reading outcomes.

Grofčíková and Máčajová support this view, showing that children who score highly in rhyme awareness tests are also more proficient in recognising sound-letter relationships and

decoding print (119). Their longitudinal study tracked preschool children's phonological development over two years, demonstrating that early rhyme exposure created lasting advantages in literacy acquisition. The researchers noted that children who engaged regularly with nursery rhymes showed enhanced ability to manipulate phonemes, blend sounds and recognise onset-rime patterns compared to their peers with limited rhyme exposure.

From a psychological standpoint, Mullen notes that rhymes do more than develop language – they foster cooperative learning, emotional regulation and classroom cohesion (47). These affective dimensions are especially crucial in early childhood, where learning is often embedded in social interactions. The rhythmic, predictable nature of nursery rhymes provides emotional security for young learners, creating a safe space for language experimentation and risk-taking.

Prosic-Santovac, in her study on EFL learners, demonstrates how traditional English rhymes support pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition and motivation through their playful format (30). Her research in multilingual classrooms revealed that nursery rhymes served as cultural bridges, helping non-native speakers develop not only linguistic competence but also cultural literacy. The study highlighted how rhymes' memorable patterns aided retention of new vocabulary and grammatical structures, while their engaging format reduced anxiety often associated with second language learning.

Recent neuroscientific research has provided additional support for the pedagogical value of nursery rhymes. Studies using neuroimaging techniques have shown that exposure to rhythmic, rhyming text activates multiple brain regions simultaneously, including areas responsible for language processing, memory formation and emotional regulation. This multi-modal activation suggests that nursery rhymes provide particularly rich stimulation for developing neural networks associated with literacy.

Discussion and Analysis

Children in the play-age stage are cognitively primed for language acquisition. During this period, they are particularly receptive to sound structures and enjoy repetition, rhythm and routine – all key elements found in nursery rhymes. These auditory features help scaffold a child's understanding of how spoken language is structured, making rhymes invaluable tools for introducing phonemes and syllables.

The developmental timing couldn't be better. Young children naturally love patterns, repetition and rhythm – exactly what nursery rhymes provide. Their developing brains are wired to notice these patterns, making rhymes perfect tools for teaching the building blocks of language. This isn't just about memorising words; it's about helping children understand how language works at its most basic level.

In EFL settings, rhymes offer a dual advantage. First, they introduce phonetic features of English in ways that feel familiar and entertaining. Second, they support

comprehension through multisensory reinforcement. Wright observes that children engaged in stories and songs actively search for meaning, which strengthens their desire to understand and participate in the language-learning process (4). This active engagement is particularly important in multilingual contexts, where motivation and positive attitudes towards the target language significantly influence learning outcomes.

What makes nursery rhymes particularly powerful is their flexibility. Teachers can use them anywhere, anytime, without special equipment or training. They can be adapted for different learning styles – some children learn better with actions, others with pictures and still others through repetition alone. This adaptability makes them especially valuable in diverse classrooms where children come from different linguistic backgrounds and have varying learning needs.

Children who frequently hear and repeat rhymes develop a metalinguistic awareness that allows them to recognise patterns in language. For instance, rhyming sets such as “cat, hat, mat” train them to detect onset-rime divisions. This skill becomes crucial as they begin decoding words while reading. Bryant et al. report that knowing eight rhymes by age four is correlated with strong reading ability by age eight (429). This correlation suggests that early rhyme exposure creates a foundation for later literacy success that extends well beyond the preschool years.

Phonemic awareness – the capacity to manipulate individual sounds in words – is among the strongest predictors of literacy and rhymes offer an organic route to cultivating this skill. The playful nature of rhymes removes the pressure often associated with formal phonics instruction, allowing children to experiment with sounds in a supportive environment. This natural approach to phonemic awareness development is particularly beneficial for children who may struggle with more direct instructional methods.

Clay argues that children who have practised segmenting words through rhymes are better prepared to decode unfamiliar words in reading. They approach words analytically, breaking them down into phonemes in the sequence they hear them (76). This analytical approach is fundamental to reading development, as it enables children to apply their phonological knowledge to new words they encounter in text. The transfer of skills from oral rhyming activities to written word recognition demonstrates the powerful connection between early phonological experiences and later literacy success.

Similarly, Lyon emphasises that children with limited exposure to rhyming struggle with foundational reading skills like blending and segmentation (67). This observation highlights the importance of early intervention and prevention. By ensuring that all children have access to rich rhyming experiences, educators can help prevent reading difficulties before they become entrenched.

A common teaching strategy involves using rhyme families to reinforce phonemic

and

orthographic patterns. For example, once a child masters the /op/ pattern in “hop,” “top,” and “mop,” they can apply this knowledge when encountering similar words in texts. This process, known as orthographic mapping, helps create mental connections between written symbols and their corresponding sounds, fostering fluency and word recognition (Nation 58). The systematic nature of rhyme families provides a structured approach to developing both phonological and orthographic knowledge simultaneously.

The cognitive benefits of rhyme extend to memory and executive functioning. Király et al. show that preschool-aged children retain rhymed texts more effectively than adults, suggesting a developmental window in which rhyme exposure optimally enhances verbal memory (2). This finding has significant implications for curriculum design, suggesting that the preschool years represent a critical period for rhyme-based instruction. The superior memory performance of young children with rhymed material indicates that their developing brains are particularly well-suited to processing and retaining rhythmic, patterned language.

Mullen adds that repeating and sequencing rhymes trains working memory and enhances focus, which are essential for classroom learning and task persistence (48). These executive function skills are increasingly recognised as fundamental to academic success across all subject areas. The development of attention control and working memory through rhyming activities thus provides benefits that extend far beyond literacy instruction.

Rhymes also play a psychological role by allowing children to externalise and rehearse emotions. Themes such as falling, mischief, or danger – common in rhymes – mirror real childhood anxieties. Through rhythmic repetition, children explore these experiences safely, gaining emotional resilience. Mullen describes how singing “Jack and Jill” or “Rock-a-bye Baby” lets children express fear and resolution in structured formats, which contributes to their emotional growth (49).

This emotional processing function of nursery rhymes is particularly important in early childhood education, where social-emotional learning is increasingly recognised as crucial for academic success. The safe exploration of challenging emotions through rhyme helps children develop coping strategies and emotional vocabulary that will serve them throughout their lives.

Socially, rhymes are often performed as group activities, fostering inclusion and participation. This is especially important in EFL or multilingual classrooms, where not all children are equally comfortable with the instructional language. Concannon-Gibney found that incorporating actions and visuals alongside rhymes increased student engagement, especially among those with limited language proficiency (45). The communal nature of rhyme activities creates opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative learning that might not emerge in more formal instructional settings.

In resource-limited classrooms, rhymes offer a low-cost, high-yield strategy for language instruction. Oral, adaptable and easy to memorise, they require no special equipment. Teachers in such settings can use rhymes to mark transitions, introduce topics or review vocabulary – all while supporting literacy. This versatility makes nursery rhymes particularly valuable in educational contexts where resources are scarce but the need for effective instruction remains high.

Recent studies in neuroscience support these observations. Researchers at Cambridge University found that infants exposed to nursery rhymes showed increased neural activity in language-related regions of the brain (“Why Reading Nursery Rhymes”). This suggests that early rhythmic exposure may stimulate pathways critical for later reading success. The neurological evidence provides a biological foundation for the pedagogical practices that educators have long intuited to be effective.

Conclusion

Nursery rhymes do more than entertain – they provide critical scaffolding for the development of phonological awareness, cognitive function and emotional intelligence. These brief, rhythmic compositions are ideal vehicles for introducing sound structures, fostering metalinguistic awareness and supporting the transition from oral to written language. Their repetitive patterns not only facilitate memory retention but also encourage active listening and linguistic play, especially vital in EFL and multilingual contexts.

The evidence presented throughout this review demonstrates that nursery rhymes represent a convergence of developmental appropriateness, pedagogical effectiveness and cultural relevance. Their enduring presence across cultures and generations speaks to their fundamental compatibility with human cognitive architecture and language learning processes. As educational practices continue to evolve, nursery rhymes offer a bridge between traditional wisdom and contemporary research-based instruction.

By engaging the whole child – cognitively, socially and emotionally – rhymes foster a comprehensive approach to early literacy. This holistic impact is particularly significant in contemporary educational contexts, where the integration of academic and social-emotional learning is increasingly recognised as essential for student success. The multifaceted benefits of nursery rhymes make them invaluable tools for addressing the diverse needs of young learners in inclusive educational settings.

Educators and parents alike should see nursery rhymes not as quaint traditions but as scientifically supported tools for language development. The research evidence strongly supports the systematic use of nursery rhymes in early childhood education, particularly for children from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Rather than viewing them as outdated traditions, educators should recognise nursery rhymes as scientifically validated tools for

language development. The evidence is clear: children who engage with rhymes early in life develop stronger foundations for reading success.

Future research directions should continue to explore the optimal timing, frequency and delivery methods for rhyme-based instruction. Additionally, investigation into the long-term effects of early rhyme exposure on reading comprehension and academic achievement would provide valuable insights for educational policy and practice. The potential for technology-enhanced rhyme experiences also merits exploration, as digital platforms may offer new opportunities for personalised and adaptive rhyme-based learning.

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