

USING NURSERY RHYMES TO TEACH VOCABULARY: A CASE STUDY OF FIFTH-GRADE STUDENTS IN A PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN BANTEN

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the learning process, challenges, and student responses to teaching vocabulary through nursery rhymes in a public elementary school in Banten. A qualitative research approach was employed, with data collected through observations, interviews, and documentation. The participants included one teacher and 20 fifth-grade students. The findings revealed that the teacher encountered difficulties in selecting nursery rhymes that aligned with the lesson materials, while many students struggled with self-confidence. Nevertheless, the students responded positively to the use of nursery rhymes in vocabulary instruction. The approach helped them improve their pronunciation, retain vocabulary more effectively, and led to increased English scores in Themes 1, 2, and 4, where nursery rhymes were used as instructional media. In conclusion, nursery rhymes serve as an effective tool for enhancing vocabulary learning among elementary school students.

Keywords: *Teaching, Vocabulary, Nursery Rhymes.*

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is categorized as a foreign language, yet it is increasingly emphasized at all levels of education to prepare students for global engagement. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology mandates English instruction from elementary to high school, reflecting the need for Indonesian learners to compete in international contexts. English proficiency plays a vital role in enabling communication and accessing global information (Isadaud et al., 2022), making it essential to introduce language learning from an early age.

To build English proficiency, learners must master four key language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—supported by components such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Vocabulary is a foundational element that supports all other skills. According to Cameron (2001), vocabulary knowledge is central to language acquisition, especially at the elementary level, where children's cognitive development is well-suited to learning concrete language. Hurlock (1993) explains that young learners are in a stage where their brains are highly receptive, allowing them to absorb and retain new words more easily. Therefore, effective and engaging vocabulary instruction is critical in early language education. One promising method for this age group is the use of nursery rhymes, which align with children's developmental needs and offer repetitive, musical exposure to new words in context.

Several studies have investigated the use of media in teaching vocabulary to young learners. For example, Liando et al. (2022), in their study titled Pictures as a Learning Media in Teaching Vocabulary, found that using pictures significantly improved students'

vocabulary outcomes. The visual appeal of the images increased students' enthusiasm and helped maintain their attention during lessons. Similarly, Aba (2019), in *Flashcards as a Media in Teaching English Vocabulary*, concluded that flashcards were effective tools for helping students memorize vocabulary and stay motivated. Another study by Indrasari et al. (2018), *Big Book: Attractive Media for Teaching Vocabulary to Lower Class of Young Learners*, demonstrated that using big books had a positive effect on vocabulary mastery, with most students in the experimental group reaching an independent level of vocabulary proficiency.

Based on preliminary observations at the research site, English had previously been removed from the elementary curriculum under the 2013 Curriculum (K13). However, with the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, English has been reintroduced as a subject in elementary schools. In this school, fifth-grade students only began learning English in fourth grade. Moreover, the teacher assigned to teach English does not possess a comprehensive background in English education. Despite this, the teacher utilizes multimedia tools such as projectors to present videos and songs during lessons. One of the media commonly used is nursery rhymes. Nursery rhymes are simple, repetitive songs designed for children, often incorporating rhythm and animation. These elements make the learning process enjoyable and engaging for young learners, as children at this age are naturally drawn to music and visual content. As Blondel and Miller (2001) suggest, nursery rhymes can add creativity and interactivity to language lessons.

Supporting this practice, several recent studies have highlighted the benefits of using nursery rhymes in English language teaching (Hery & Arshad, 2020; Mello, 2022; Suciati&Erzad, 2022; Fachraini, 2017; Andari &Wiguna, 2022). These studies consistently show that nursery rhymes support vocabulary acquisition among young learners. However, Hery and Arshad (2020) employed a quantitative approach, while Mello (2022) focused on preschool-aged children. Similarly, Suciati and Erzad (2022) examined nursery rhymes in playgroup settings, and both Fachraini (2017) and Andari &Wiguna (2022) centered their research on kindergarten students using children's songs.

Despite the valuable insights from previous research, there is still a gap in the literature regarding the use of nursery rhymes for teaching vocabulary to upper elementary school students. To address this gap, the present study investigates the implementation of nursery rhymes in teaching vocabulary to fifth-grade students in a public elementary school in Banten.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study method to explore the process of teaching vocabulary through nursery rhymes, the challenges encountered in implementation, and students' perceptions of learning English through this method. The research was conducted at a state elementary school in Banten, involving one fifth-grade class consisting of 20 students and their English teacher. Data was collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to examine the teaching process. Interviews were conducted with both the teacher and students. The interview teacher aimed to gather insights into their experience in teaching vocabulary using nursery rhymes. The student interviews explored their learning experiences in the English class. Documentation, in the form of student score lists, was used to support the findings. Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation was employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researchers discuss the data obtained from the observation, interview, and documentation. The researchers found that the vocabulary item taught was a noun about common health problems. The vocabulary related to common health problems are stomachache, sore eyes, sore throat, cold, toothache, and headache. In the learning process, students are expected to be able to identify and express the types of common health problems. There are three stages of learning conducted by the teacher they are pre-teaching, while teaching, and post-teaching. In the pre-teaching, the teacher says a greeting. The teacher did not check the attendance list because it was done in the first lesson, and English was taught in the second lesson. The teacher checks students' readiness and liven up the class atmosphere by inviting students to sing the "Are you ready" song. The students ask the teacher about the material that they will learn about. Thus, the teacher connects the material with daily life so that students can imagine the vocabulary to be learned and explain the purpose of the material.

In the core activity, the teacher asked students to look at the picture in the textbook and mention the health problem. The teacher asked about health problems that students have felt. Then, the students answer in Indonesian. After that, the teacher mentioned the vocabulary clearly in English and asked the students to repeat it. When mentioning the vocabulary, the teacher demonstrated that she had a cough, toothache, etc. The teacher also put her hand on the location of the pain. For example, if the teacher said headache the teacher asked students to put their hands on their heads. It can be seen in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 1 : The teacher asks about health problems based on pictures in the textbook

T : Coba lihat gambar ini, penyakit apa yang dirasakan nenek?

S1 : Batuk bu guru

S3 : Batuk uhuk..uhuk..

T : Benar, kalau kita batuk bagaimana suaranya? Uhuk..uhuk.. (demonstrate having a cough). Nah bahasa Inggrisnya batuk itu cough. Coba katakan bersama cough..

S : cough.. cough...

T : I have a cough..ayokatakan bersama

S : I have a cough .. I have a cough.

After mentioning all the vocabulary, the teacher played the nursery rhyme video through a projector. The teacher sang the nursery rhymes. Then, she guided the students to sing line by line without music. Some students find it difficult to follow the tempo. Thus, the teacher slowed down the tempo so students could follow. After guiding them to sing line by line, the teacher played the nursery rhymes slowly and asked students to sing together. The teacher asked each male and female student to sing together. After singing, the teacher asked students about the health problems that they had sung about before. The students can answer and pronounce correctly, but some students need to repeat to pronounce correctly. It can be seen in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 2: The students asked about the vocabulary in the nursery rhymes

T : Di dalam video tadi ada berapa hewan yang pergi ke dokter?

S7 : Ada tiga bu, penguin, kudanil, samagajah

T : Betul, kalau sakit apa yang dialami penguin? coba student 16 jawab

S16 : cough..

T : Betul, kalau kudanil sakit apa yang dialami? Coba student 4 jawab

S4 : Stomak

T : Stomachache (correct student's pronunciation)

Students were asked to look at the pictures in the textbook and circle the pictures according to the health problem the teacher discussed. After that, the students also completed the sentence according to the health problems in the textbook. In this stage, students felt confused by the picture. Then they asked the teacher, and some students discussed it with their classmates. Before ending the class, the teacher played nursery rhymes again and sang them together.

In post-teaching, the teacher asked students about the material that had been taught. The teacher asked the students whether they had any difficulty in understanding the material. The prayer after class was not conducted by the teacher because prayer after the lesson was only conducted in the last lesson. After that, the teacher said a greeting to the students.

Based on the data obtained from the students' score list, the researchers found that the fifth-grade teacher held daily tests on each chapter. The chapters studied by fifth-grade students in semester 1 include theme 1, "What a delicious food" with a focus on language about the taste of food, such as sweet, salty, bitter, and sour. Theme 2 "I want an ice cream cone" with focus language on the quantity of food, such as an ice cream cone, a bottle of water, and a hand of bananas. Theme 3 "How much is it?" with focus language on the prices of food and drink, such as a kilo of sugar is 11,000 rupiahs. Theme 4 "I've got a stomachache" in focus language about common health problems such as stomachache, headache, toothache, cold, sore eyes, and sore throat.

Fifth-grade students in this school experienced an increase in their scores on theme 1, theme 2, and theme 4 tests, where in that week the teacher used nursery rhymes as a learning media. While in the 3rd test, the learning media used were visual media in the form of paper money and pictures. In the tests that experienced an increase in scores, the elements achieved included reading, writing, speaking, listening, presenting, and viewing.

The challenge faced by the teacher was difficult to find nursery rhymes that fit with the material. When the teacher has difficulty finding nursery rhymes that are suitable for the theme teacher will find nursery rhymes that are similar to Indonesian nursery rhymes or change Indonesian nursery rhymes into English. For example, in the theme of family teacher used the song "My family" which is similar to "*satusatuakusayangibu*"

Moreover, there are challenges that students face in learning vocabulary in nursery. If the tempo is too fast, students cannot follow the lyrics. Students also have difficulty pronouncing the vocabulary they learned. They need the time to pronounce the vocabulary correctly, and the teacher needs to make sure the students can pronounce the vocabulary before singing the nursery rhymes. Some students also forgot the lyrics, so they need to read the lyrics while singing. The students also face difficulties with self-confidence. Some students felt embarrassed to sing in front of the class, they preferred to sing together with their friends. It can be seen from the table below:

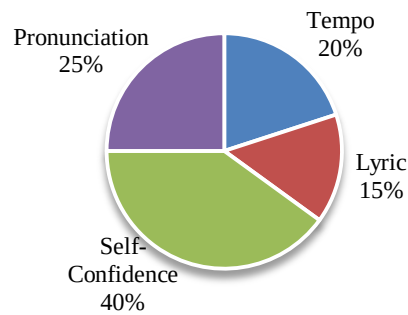


Figure 1. Student's difficulty in singing Nursery Rhymesbased on the Interview

When singing nursery rhymes, 20% of students said that singing is difficult when the rhyme is too fast and 15% of them forgot the lyrics. The students need low speed when singing nursery rhymes. 25% of students face difficulty in pronunciation. They said English words were different than Indonesian words, pronunciation of English words was not the same as the written ones. If the rhymes are too fast, it is difficult for them to pronounce the word. Also, most students lack self-confidence, as many as 40% of students felt nervous as said by student 14 "I am afraid of making mistakes". Student 14 comment was elaborated by student 9 expressed "I am afraid my friend will judge my voice". It indicates that most of the students have self-confidence problems. They are not confident with their voice, felt nervous about singing in front of others, and they are afraid of making mistakes. Thus, the teacher needs to increase student confidence by giving compliments after singing.

Although they have difficulty with self-confidence, most of the students still want to learn vocabulary with nursery rhymes. They still like to sing together. All the students said that they want to learn more vocabulary because the class is more fun if they sing together while learning and they are entertained if they learn with nursery rhymes. Based on the interview 30% of students said nursery rhymes help them in reading vocabulary. 30% of students said nursery rhymes can help pronounce vocabulary, 30% of students said nursery rhymes can help to remember vocabulary, and 10% of students said nursery rhymes enhance their mood during learning. It can be seen from the figure below:

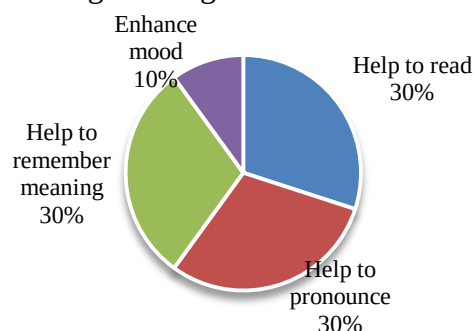


Figure 2. Nursery Rhymes Can Help to Learn Vocabulary Based on the Interview

After singing nursery rhymes, all the students can easily remember the vocabulary because the vocabulary is in the lyrics. The nursery rhymes that have been taught by the teacher are always sung by students at school and home, as stated by student 2, "yes, because usually I sing every time". Student 2's comment was elaborated by student 11

claimed, "Yes, I can remember because I sing at school and home". With this repetition, students would memorize the lyrics and know the meaning of the lyrics.

Based on the observation results, during the process of teaching vocabulary through nursery rhymes, the teacher clearly introduced the target vocabulary before playing the rhyme. While singing, the teacher also demonstrated movements related to the vocabulary, such as acting out "headache," "stomachache," "toothache," "cold," "cough," "sore eyes," and "sore throat." This approach aligns with the basic principles of introducing nursery rhymes to children, as suggested by Sukartiningsih&Priyantin (2018) and Raimanda et al. (2024), who recommend physically engaging with the rhyme by touching, shaking, wiggling, or mimicking actions mentioned in the lyrics. The teacher implemented the instructional steps by first modeling the rhyme through singing and then guiding students to repeat it line by line at a slow tempo before singing together as a class. This differs from the steps proposed by Sukartiningsih&Priyantin (2018), who suggest having students sing in small groups of five or ten. In this case, the teacher divided the students into male and female groups for singing activities.

Based on the interview, the teacher reported difficulties in finding nursery rhymes that align with the lesson themes. The rhymes selected were adapted to meet students' needs. This aligns with the theory by Slattery and Willis (2001), who emphasized that songs or rhymes used in teaching should be appropriate for the students' age and interests, match their English proficiency level, and have a catchy, easy-to-remember melody. Therefore, the teacher either selected rhymes that resembled familiar Indonesian nursery rhymes, translated Indonesian rhymes into English, or searched for simple rhymes on YouTube.

However, students encountered challenges with self-confidence and pronunciation. Despite this, nursery rhymes can help develop students' confidence. As noted by Hery and Arshad (2020), exposure to nursery rhymes fosters positive values such as empathy, listening skills, cooperation, accountability, and self-confidence among learners. Data from the interviews revealed that 80% of students felt happy and 20% felt excited when nursery rhymes were used in class. This indicates a generally positive response toward the use of nursery rhymes as a learning medium. These findings are consistent with Suciati and Erzad (2022), who stated that English learning should be engaging and enjoyable. Similarly, Fachraini (2017) found that songs can increase students' enthusiasm and motivation. Most students agreed that nursery rhymes assisted them in learning vocabulary, and 75% stated that singing rhymes helped them improve their pronunciation. They believed that nursery rhymes made vocabulary easier to understand and remember.

The results indicate that students responded positively to the use of nursery rhymes in vocabulary instruction, partly because songs are commonly used as learning media by teachers at this school. This aligns with the characteristics of young learners who enjoy clapping, dancing, jumping, and singing. As Brumfit (1997) explains, young learners are typically keen and enthusiastic, requiring both physical movement and cognitive stimulation, ideally integrated together.

The fifth-grade students in this study began learning English in the fourth grade, meaning they had only two years of exposure. English is not their first language; they primarily speak Indonesian or Javanese at home, and the home environment does not support the use of English in daily conversation. Nevertheless, students were able to retain vocabulary learned through nursery rhymes. This was evidenced by improvements in their scores on the Theme 1, Theme 2, and Theme 4 tests—administered during weeks when nursery rhymes were used as a learning medium. These results support the effectiveness of nursery rhymes in teaching vocabulary and are consistent with findings by Andari and Wiguna (2022), who noted that students showed progress in learning, understanding, and retaining new words.

Overall, the use of nursery rhymes can enhance teachers' vocabulary teaching strategies. The findings suggest that nursery rhymes are effective instructional tools for elementary students, particularly in the fifth grade. Teachers can enrich these activities by incorporating acting, dancing, or games. Furthermore, nursery rhymes can be introduced to other grade levels within the school. Teachers are also encouraged to pay closer attention to students' learning difficulties, allowing them to adapt to their strategies and better support students' vocabulary development.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that teaching vocabulary through nursery rhymes is effective at the elementary level. Teachers first ensure that students can correctly pronounce the target vocabulary before singing, which helps build familiarity and confidence. In selecting appropriate nursery rhymes, teachers either choose those already familiar to students or adapt popular Indonesian rhymes into English. This approach supports students' vocabulary acquisition by reinforcing words through repetition both in class and at home. As a result, students are more likely to retain the vocabulary they have learned. Future research is encouraged to explore the integration of nursery rhymes in developing other English language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

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