

EFL TEACHING THROUGH SONGS AND RHYMES FOR PRESCHOOLERS IN ALBANIA, CASE STUDY

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Challenging or not, foreign language teaching in the early stages of kids’ schooling is often considered a daunting but yet appealing experience for the young learners. Bridging the kindergarten stage into the preschool one is often accompanied by emotional, linguistic, psychological difficulties which considerably influence their individual acquisition abilities. Incorporation of foreign language learning among preschoolers is often believed to cause language interference and confusion with the native language. However, making a careful selection and application of the teaching strategies and materials for the preschool young learners can often guarantee success in the development of kids’ learning abilities.

The aim of this paper is to highlight a) the importance of songs and rhymes in EFL teaching to preschoolers; b) the benefits of EFL teaching through songs and rhymes for preschoolers, c) the improvement of kids’ perception skills in their early stage of education. The preschool classes in two educational institutions in Elbasan constituted the target group for this study. During the first semester of the school year 2019-2020, English language teachers of the target schools were engaged in conducting EFL classes through songs and rhymes for this category of pupils, over a period of seven months. Observations and teachers’ questionnaires were conducted during this period of time, assisting in gathering concrete data concerning the issue. The elaboration of the data displayed outstanding results. Songs and rhymes although they mostly break standard grammatical rules when it comes to sentence structures, they provided motivation and a great source of vocabulary enrichment for the kids. Moreover, observations showed that EFL teaching through songs and rhymes helped in increasing literacy among the target preschoolers, as well as they provided early phonetic development which contributes positively in both the mother tongue and foreign language acquisition. Therefore, incorporating and applying EFL teaching to preschoolers through songs and rhymes is accompanied by linguistic and psychological benefits highly contributing to their acquisition abilities in the future.

Key words: songs, rhymes, foreign language, acquisition, skills

Introduction

Number One
Look at the sun,
Number Two
This is my shoe,
Number three
It's a tree,
Number four
Open the door,
Number five
I'm alive,
Number six
Pick up sticks...

The above nursery rhyme in English language would appear in the few English course books (English 5) used in Albania by the early 90s. Although our educational system was going through unprecedented changes highly influenced by the social and political situation of the time, the teaching methodology was trying to pace contemporary trends concerning foreign language teaching. Simple songs and nursery rhymes would occupy pages of the books although foreign language skills and competences were not as elaborated as they are today referring to the European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001, P.11) according to which language acquisition is analyzed through the mastering of the four linguistic skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. They were an inseparable part of the foreign language teaching process, a “tradition” which goes on in the 21st century’s foreign language classes, with pupils highly enjoying songs and rhymes often facilitated by the latest technological gadgets.

Songs and rhymes are enjoyable for kids. They never seem to get out of fashion. On the contrary the latest technological developments have often contributed in making good use of them in the classroom during the teaching process. Songs and rhymes are appealing and interesting for the young learners usually characterized by an “innate” high language potential in acquiring new foreign languages, or what Chomsky identifies as “linguistic competence, which forms the basis of competence in language acquisition” (Cook, 2003, p. 41-42). “Young learners are enthusiastic in learning a foreign language and yet they are likely to lose their concentration due to many factors.”(Cameron, 2001, p. 8) Therefore, mixing up music and language, words and musical notes through songs and rhymes besides linguistic and affective benefits is highly appreciated for its positive influence on maintaining kids’ concentration active over a longer period of time often stimulating certain parts of the brain that are connected to motivation. The

higher the level of motivation is, the more efficient the teaching process is for both the teacher and pupils. Therefore the goals and objectives of this paper are:

- To highlight the importance of songs and rhymes in EFL teaching to preschoolers
- To highlight the benefits of EFL teaching through songs and rhymes for preschoolers
- To highlight the improvement of kids' linguistics perception skills in their early stage of education
- To highlight the benefits of EFL teaching through songs and poems in enriching their vocabulary and increase their motivation, etc.
- To highlight the importance of songs in kids' psychological well being

Literature review

The purpose of this study is to provide a broad perspective on the benefits of using songs and poems during EFL teaching to preschoolers. It is to be admitted that music has always been considered as a therapy for people and kids' well-being. As Patel (2008, p. 9) has already mentioned in his book "Music, Language and the Brain", it further consolidates the music therapy and its benefits on humans. According to him "Every human infant is born into a world with two distinct sound systems. The first is linguistic and includes the vowels, consonants, and pitch contrasts of the native language. The second is musical and includes the timbres and pitches of the culture's music." (Patel, 2008, p.9)

Therefore, human brain is not taught how to process and interpret music, on the contrary it is this musical innate ability of ours together with Chomsky's "universal grammar" (Cook, 2003, p.42) that shapes our behavior and attitude versus music, that shapes our linguistic expression not only in the mother tongue but also in a foreign language. It is exactly this musical innate ability of humans that has encouraged educators in adapting music features for linguistic and didactic purposes too during the teaching process.

Another essential element to be considered in language learning among kids through songs and poems is "the limited span of attention" (Geoffrey B. et al., 1984, p. 168-169) mentioned by Geoffrey B. et al. in the book "Teaching English As a Foreign Language" (2003). Preschoolers, a category of pupils whose age varies from 5 to 6 years old not only in Albania but even in other countries are characterized by a short span of attention, consequently lessons need not only to be interesting and attractive to grab their attention but they also need to be short and effective helping teachers in measuring their level of success through kids' performance may it be linguistic or kinesthetic. Poems and songs do perfectly match this above mentioned criterion. They are often short especially those selected for preschoolers. They often "break" strict grammatical rules paying more attention to entertainment and building "word banks" (PDST, unknown date, p. 3) in kids training their brain neurons for further language acquisition in the future, contributing positively to both native language and foreign language acquisition too.

In the book “Teaching English to young learners”(Geoffrey B. et al., 1984, p. 8) the author claims that this language acquisition through songs and poems is an appropriate “tool for cognitive growth” in kids too. The more preschoolers are exposed to poems and songs in a foreign language during the teaching process by their educators, the more developed their cognitive skills will be. Furthermore, they significantly encourage the development of kids’ motor skills too. When applying songs and poems in the classroom pupils may be required to interpret and accompany them by TPR actions (English Teaching Forum 50, p. 10) not only linguistic ones. It is like a win-win situation in which preschoolers obtain linguistic and physical benefits which positively contribute to their psychological well-being and motivation in the classroom consequently reflected even in their school achievements. Moreover, the individual interpretation of the kids based on their perception of the poem or song is likely to enhance “creativity and active learning of theirs” (Fernandez et al, 2018, p.10).

What teachers need to be careful about when using songs and poems during their teaching process is the selection criteria of theirs. As Rubio (Rubio, A., p.93-94) mentions in his article on the use of poems and songs, they can be classified into different ones depending on their content. Consequently, educators can make a suitable choice depending on the topic of their lesson. There are songs or poems that focus on colors, animals, actions, commands, birds, birthdays, schools, family, teachers, friends, etc. There are other ones which consist of a combination of themes, that is actions and states. Therefore, the selection process needs to be in accordance with the topic of the lesson, the age of pupils, etc. The more appropriate the selection is the most effective their use will be in the classroom during the teaching process.

Methodology

The realization of this study would not have been possible without the positive cooperation with the two educational institutions “Naim Frashëri” and “Luigj Gurakuqi” school (which do have preschool preparatory classes) as well as the Regional Educational Directory of Elbasan. Our educational system for preschoolers does not include EFL teaching, with the exception of some schools in Albania which have been selected as part of a pilot project initiated by the Quality Assurance Agency of pre-university Education (ASCAP, 2020).

The target group in the two educational institutions mentioned above consisted of pupils aged 5-6 years old. The number of pupils per class was approximately 20-25. The observations for the realization of this paper were conducted over a period of seven months, October 2019 until April 2020. One of the limitations during this period of time was the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic which obliged the Ministry of Education in our country to close schools and attend classes online. Due to this, the instruments applied for the collection of data were adapted to the above Covid-19 situation.

Data collection was mainly dependent on the use of observations and questionnaires for both the teachers and pupils. Permission for the realization of the observations and



questionnaires was taken not only by the school principals but even by the two schools' psychologists. They were also provided the questions of the survey and observation forms in order to consider their content before application in the classroom. Pupils who became part of this process were also introduced with the purpose of this mini project in order to create the right conditions for its realization. Considering the age of the pupils and the fact that most of them could not read questions in the survey, the questionnaires were organized through pictures and images, in which foreign language teachers involved in this process were asked to facilitate their completion by asking individual pupils of the selected classes. Organizing questionnaires in such a way was helpful for teachers as well as pupils since they felt comfortable in providing faithful and stress free answers.

In order not to extend the number of hours for the pupils, there was reached an agreement to make use of the extra-curricular classes which teachers had at their disposal to organize extra-curricular activities. Besides a syllabus prepared in advance in accordance with the age of the kids and topic of this study, there was also selected a course book "New Yippee" (Mitchell, H., 2014) which offered a combination of language skills for this category of pupils, including listening too consisting of short songs, poems and stories which provide the focus of this mini project of foreign language teaching among preschoolers.

Discussions and results

1. Understanding the benefits of songs and poems during FL teaching for preschoolers

Literature review treated in the first part of this paper helped in understanding the use of songs and poems in FL teaching for preschoolers and their benefits in favour of the teaching process and the kids' achievements. Applying them for this category of pupils during this preparatory phase, over a period of seven months, nearly an entire school year, further highlighted and reinforced the advantages of theirs. Foreign language teaching in general in Albania has continuously been improving, trying to implement new techniques and strategies in all classes matching the demands of foreign language teaching all over the world, assisted by the use of colorful and well-structured foreign language coursebooks. The elaboration of the data generated by the two questionnaires used during this mini project pointed out outstanding results related to the use of songs and poems in the classroom. The following kids' questionnaire brings a lot of insights on their attitude versus songs and poems in the classroom, regardless of their age.

Kids' questionnaire		 / YES	 / NO
		Using songs/poems in the classroom	
1.	Do your teacher using songs and poems in the classroom?	65.3%	28.1%

2.	Do you engage when the teacher asks you to sing them?	48%	13.3%
3.	Do they create disturbing noise in the classroom?	26.4%	52%
4.	I like songs most	67.3%	39.5%
5.	I enjoy both of them	23.4%	25.2%

Note: The remaining percentages include pupils who did not give any answer to the questions

As it can be observed from the percentages of the questionnaire, most preschoolers 65.3% of theirs greatly enjoyed the teaching process when their teachers used songs and poems in the foreign language classroom. This was obviously accompanied by their active engagement and participation during the lesson, even by performing TPR (????????) activities which helped in the reinforcement of the knowledge obtained too. Poems and songs seem to be rewarding making no gender differentiation when it came to participation as well. Both boys and girls were highly motivated to participate in the teaching drills and exercises reflecting the same level of contentment, which is clearly shown even by the 48% of the positive answers provided by the kids themselves. Furthermore, although the two last months of this project period, March-April were organized online due to pandemic, yet kids' participation was considerably evident by the performance videos that they sent to their teachers in the platform used by the educators. Providing clear and easy to understand instructions helped teachers and kids too to overcome the difficulties of the pandemic constraints.

It is interesting to consider kids' percentage on the level of noise created by the use of songs and poems in the classroom. Almost 52% of them were of the opinion that the noise created was not disturbing on the contrary it seemed to create a lively, cheerful environment full of activities and drills in support of the teaching process.

One concern related to this can be associated with the teachers' answers in their questionnaires regarding classroom management. As it can already be observed from the following table (teachers' questionnaire), almost 39.2% of theirs shared the opinion that when using songs and poems the classroom management Seldom runs smoothly. Selecting the adverb of frequency "Seldom" as a response to the question of the survey provides hints on the difficulty of successfully managing the classroom when applying songs and poems especially in rather big classes characterized by a high number of pupils, in our case nearly 25 per class. This is further influenced by the lack of physical space in some schools which directly influences the "spatial management"(CDOE, 2000, p. 7) of kids' performances especially physical ones during daily classroom activities.

Kids' likes and dislikes constitute another essential element for the preschoolers. When asked on their preferences over poems and songs, almost 67.3% expressed their preference to

songs rather than poems. This is mainly associated with the presence of music in songs, which makes them enjoyable and motivating, encouraging their souls in classroom participation. Poems are not left behind in this aspect but the presence of rhythm in songs, seems to influence considerably waking up their magic brains and body, taking into consideration even the innate kinesthetic nature of this age. Such elements offer a win-win situation for both participants, the pupils and the teachers; on one side teachers obtain the success of their teaching or didactic skills reinforcing motivation, pleasure and academic achievement and on the other side kids' satisfaction during the teaching process further consolidates their promising achievements in their bright future.

Teachers' questionnaire results

Teachers' questionnaire over the same topic offers a broader perspective on the benefits of using songs and poems in the classroom, viewing it not only from the motivation side but even from the linguistic benefits of kids in both languages, their mother tongue and the foreign language too.

Teachers' questionnaire		Always %	Often %	Sometimes %	Seldom %	Never %
Using songs/poems in the classroom						
1.	I use songs/poems in my class for preschoolers	40.5%	-	32%	-	7%
2.	They increase kids' motivation and concentration	27%	53%	-	21%	-
3.	Using songs/poems in the foreign language does not interfere native language	-	48.7%	31%	-	-
4.	When using songs and poems, classroom management runs smoothly	18.6%	26%	-	39.2%	-
5.	They encourage kids' fluency in both languages	35%	27%	22.3%	-	-
6.	I try to match songs and poems with the topic of the lesson	76%	-	18%	-	-
7.	Songs/poems encourage kids' inclusion in the teaching process	62%	-	-	17%	-

Note: The remaining percentages include teachers who did not give any approval or disapproval to the above statements

Referring to the above table, it is interesting to notice the distribution of percentages about the second question, that of poems and songs increasing motivation and concentration. Most teachers 53% admit that songs and poems do increase kids' concentration and enjoyment during the teaching process but there is an essential percentage that needs to be considered, that of 21%. This group of teachers agree with the statement but they also share the opinion that if teachers want their kids to be fully engaged during the teaching process, the selection of the poems and songs needs to be careful and appropriate not only with the gender and age of the pupils but also with the topic of the lesson. Otherwise the use of poems and songs is not going to

guarantee the expected success during the teaching process. Instead of encouraging motivation, pleasure and inclusion their application during the teaching process is likely to cause boredom, lack of interest which provide the grounds for the emergence of “disruptive and undesirable behaviors” (Flicker, E. et al. 2006, p.11) in the classroom.

Another benefit of using songs and poems in the classroom as it can already be observed from the data gathered through the questionnaire is that 48.7% of the teachers being asked on this topic strongly believe that they do not interfere in language teaching, maybe it be English or another language.

Kids may acquire languages simultaneously since they do have different unique lexical and grammatical structures not interfering one another. Besides exercising their brains through foreign language acquisition, besides practicing and enriching vocabulary in the foreign language, besides exercising themselves with the sounds of the target language they are unconsciously drilling their vocal tract, vocal folds and other articulators which assist considerably in increasing fluency in both languages.

The last statement of the teachers’ questionnaire focuses on inclusion. It is outstanding to mention that 62% of the teachers do strongly believe that songs and poems highly support and encourage kids’ inclusion in the classroom. When discussing about inclusion we do not merely describe it as kids’ participation and motivation, but inclusion is viewed from a broader perspective that of the inclusion of kids with special needs in the classroom. Our Ministry of Education has continuously been trying to promote inclusion (Butler, K., 2008, p.14) through different ways. Foreign language teaching for this category of pupils has brought outstanding results in their linguistic and psychological well-being. Being introduced to a new vocabulary, songs, poems, music, rhythm makes them feel motivated in acting and reacting like their peers do, promising a better future for their families too.

Furthermore, the coursebook selected to conduct this mini project offers listening exercises too, per each lesson, in the form of short and simple songs, poems, short stories which serve greatly in developing kids’ “receptive and auditory skills”(Roach, P. 2009, p. 73) which positively serve even in the acquisition of the mother tongue. Therefore, the benefits in applying songs and poems in the classroom based on the two above questionnaires completed by preschool teachers and preschool kids seem to outweigh the disadvantages, offering a broader view on their benefits in both the native language as well as the target language.

Conclusions

Over the last decades EFL teaching has gained priority due to its use in various domains of our society as a means of communication such as in electronics, technology, international affairs, etc. Its application in the primary levels of school has encouraged educators and researchers in developing new methods and strategies in capturing pupils’ enthusiasm. Obviously, foreign

language teaching to preschoolers through songs and poems, based on the above described mini project has displayed outstanding results when it comes to its benefits in kids.

Teaching a foreign language to preschoolers is like waking up an innate liking for songs which goes back to kids' infancy, a period of time when they are sung songs or poems by their grandmothers and mothers too, as an effective means of calming them down. Since in these early years of their life, kids seem to have unconsciously recognized the absolute value of songs and poems for their well-being.

Applying songs and poems in the classroom for preschoolers during the teaching process can be distinguished for its physical and psychological benefits, which are often reflected even beyond the school environment. The drills and TPR activities that are used during songs, serve not only as physical pleasure realized through activities but also as a reinforcement of the foreign language lexicon.

Furthermore, songs and poems applied in the classroom during primary school years are flexible means to be applied by the foreign language teachers. Songs' flexibility assists educators and teachers in matching the content with the topic of the lesson. For instance, if the teacher has pre-planned to teach parts of the body to the kids, he/she can perfectly apply the video of the "*Head and shoulders*". Besides pleasure while practicing it, they also fulfill the second objective that of increasing the vocabulary and fluency while repeating the song many times.

The same thing can be said about poems too. It is obvious that they lack music and rhythm but kids can improvise it themselves based on the rhyme between lines. For instance, in the short poem "*One potato*" teachers can introduce pupils two linguistic elements simultaneously numbers and lexicon in one single poem. Hence the above examples highlight another benefit of songs and poems when applied in the classroom, that of being adapted to the topic of the lesson in order to fit several purposes, may they be didactic, linguistic or psychological ones.

So the implementation of foreign language teaching in the early years of kids' schooling may be considered as an amusing experience in their foreign language learning process. Furthermore, songs and poems being flexible in matching the topic of the lesson; encouraging motivation, participation and enthusiasm among preschoolers; enriching their lexicon, fluency and literacy through drills and continuous exercises seem to provide strong reason in extending this process even during preschool years in our educational system in Albania.

Preschoolers enjoy games, music, fun and amusement during the teaching process. Educators and teachers can absolutely provide this "gift" to their preschool kids through the use of songs and poems in the foreign language teaching, having the chance to positively influence upon their overall development.

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