Workshop title: Nursery Rhymes in the Language Class: a Revaluation

Abstract

To most teachers, nursery rhymes still remain untrodden ground, overlooking the enormous teaching potential that these cute, often irreverent and even subversive rhymes may have in the language class. It will be the purpose of the workshop a) to help demystify common prejudices against the genre, b) to build crosscultural bridges between nursery rhymes in English and in Spanish and c) to use the rhymes as springboards for creative writing activities for even early stage learners.

Summary

All of us have used nursery rhymes in young children’s ESL classes for reciting, reading or singing in the belief that they help achieve an understanding of the pronunciation, intonation and rhythm of the English language through entertaining classroom experiences.

However, to most teachers nursery rhymes still remain untrodden ground, overlooking the enormous teaching potential that these cute, often irreverent or even subversive little rhymes may have in the language class.

It is the purpose of this workshop a) to help demystify some very common prejudices concerning these rhymes, b) to build cross cultural bridges between nursery rhymes in English and Spanish and c) to use the rhymes as springboards for creative writing activities instead of their mere recitation and singing.

As to the first issue, we will be exploring how nursery rhymes can be used with students of all ages as they were not designed specifically for children. In fact many of them originated as political satires or have to do with striking historical events such as wars, plagues or natural catastrophes. Others, such as the limericks, constitute the bawdiest, and obviously the funniest of all rhymes and are definitely not meant for children. However most types of rhymes-alphabet, number, counting-out, cumulative, narrative rhymes, fingerplays, etc. -cater to children due
to their attractive style and themes. Besides, as they tend to have a repetitive pattern, they are ideal to help students internalize lexical items and patterns. The crosscultural bridge will hopefully allow us to reflect on the distinctive cultural values in Spanish and English rhymes and on the amazing similarities across cultures, and to develop an appreciation of the contributions of other cultures and of the richness of our own.

The third issue, and perhaps the most useful to teachers, is to explore the many creative writing activities that can be generated as from the humour, the absurdity and the pathos of the rhymes. For instance, early stage learners can add a line or two to a cumulative rhyme or change a final line to create a humorous anticlimax. Great poets such as Wendy Cope, Roger Mc Gough and John Agard have borrowed the pattern of certain rhymes to parody them - a definite proof of their popularity.

Finally, a revaluation of the genre will entail an appreciation of the intrinsic literary value of nursery rhymes, for teachers to know that, when choosing to deal with them in class, their students at even threshold level will be profiting from authentic material from the cultural heritage of the Western world.

Bibliography


Biographical Note
Beatriz Pena Lima is a lecturer in British Literature and Literature in the Language Class at I.E.S. en Lenguas Vivas “J. R. Fernández” and I.S.P. “J. V. Gonzalez”. She has worked as a literary consultant for foreign languages in the Curriculum Transformation Programme of the Ministry of Education. She has been a teacher trainer for Red Federal de Educación and Essarp for the last six years. She also teaches literature at Moorlands School.