



Can extensive listening to rhyme facilitate L2 English literacy?

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Extensive listening is recommended as a method of facilitating extensive reading, because an auditory representation can enhance comprehension of the written word. Clearly, the quality of what is listened to needs to be addressed. The ideal type of listening for beginners would exaggerate the prosodic features of everyday language in order to reinforce grammatical boundaries, and contain sufficient repetition so that the language can function as a mnemonic device. Extensive listening to rhyme for children learning L2 English is suggested as a means of furthering this aim. This could be effective for learners of any age, but here it is suggested that children in Japan be exposed to rhyme from kindergarten and throughout elementary school.

The relationship between phonemic awareness and reading

Pronunciation has been treated as a separate skill from reading comprehension in EFL classes in Japan, and therefore the relationship between the two skills may not be apparent. Why should attention to phonemes facilitate the development of reading skills? In her paper entitled "Phonology in second language reading: Not an optional extra", Catherine Walter (2008) explains a function of short-term memory known as the 'phonological loop', in which two seconds of what the listener has heard remains in the memory after it has been uttered. This applies not just to what has been heard, but also to what has been read. According to Walter, L1 readers of alphabetic languages store the two seconds of what they have just read phonologically rather than visually. For L2 learners, the ability to distinguish phonemes from one another is critical because these differences refer not only to sound but also to meaning. Accordingly, Walter does not recommend the teaching of reading skills in the L2 class (unless the students also lack reading skills in their L1): "Good L1 readers do not need to learn how to comprehend in order to become good L2 readers, but this study has shown that they do need to be better at mentally representing spoken language" (p. 464). Thus, the following discussion addresses how to aid learners to form better mental representations of spoken L2 English, in order to become competent readers of English.

Phonemic discrimination plays a critical part in listening comprehension. One sound can critically affect the sense of what it said, whether it be a vowel in the middle of a word (cup/cap), a consonant (lip/rip), or the final 's' used to distinguish singular from plural. Clearly weaknesses in phonemic

discrimination can be circumvented somewhat by attention to contextual clues, but phonemic awareness undoubtedly plays a role in fine-tuning learner's comprehension. Traditionally, minimal pairs have been the exercise of choice to teach L2 learners of English these distinctions, but here an alternative will be suggested: extensive listening to rhyming phrases.

Why not stick to minimal pairs?

Minimal pairs refer to pairs of words which vary in terms of a single phoneme, and which may be difficult for the L2 learner to distinguish. A minimal pair activity proceeds as follows: For example, in the case of cap and cup, the teacher says one of the following to the class: cap cap (a, a), cup cup (b, b), cap cup (a, b), or cup cap (b, a). Students write down aa, bb, ab, or ba according to what they perceived the teacher to have said. This is repeated for other minimal pairs which contrast in the same way, such as truck/track, or cat/cut.

Minimal pairs are a simple and effective way to draw attention to minimal phonemic differences between words, and to highlight how a small difference in pronunciation can lead to an important difference in meaning. Minimal pairs can certainly be an engaging exercise, and are called for when listening comprehension is impaired due to difficulties distinguishing between pairs such as those above, or even words containing two phonemic differences such as trouble and travel. However, simply drawing students' attention to the minimal pair, and conducting a quiz to distinguish between them, does not necessarily result in the ability to make this distinction. Minimal pair exercises function as a testing device, rather than an educational one. Some minimal pairs appear to be resistant to instruction, and this is frustrating for both teachers and students.

A further limitation of minimal pairs is that, as the name suggests, they provide the minimal phonemic distinction between otherwise identical word pairs. They are not presented in the wider context of an extended text, such as rhyming verse, in which the stress placed on the rhyming words serves to indicate grammatical boundaries (see Cook, 2000).

The advantages of nursery rhymes over minimal pairs

Accordingly, an alternative to the above minimal pairs exercise is the presentation of such pairs in the context of nursery rhymes. However, the use of nursery rhymes in the L2 English classroom may be considered problematic. The setting of nursery rhymes is distant in both time and place, and the language is often archaic. Nevertheless, there are clear advantages to the teaching of rhyme. Cook (2000) outlines the function of rhymes for L1 acquisition: “rhythmic breaks not only coincide with linguistic boundaries, they also emphasize those boundaries much more than they would be emphasized in everyday speech. Grammar, rhythm and actions all echo each other.” (p. 15) Accordingly, nursery rhymes perform an important linguistic function despite their apparent lack of cultural relevance. Cook demonstrates this with examples of common rhymes such as *Hickory dickory dock*, and *Lucy Locket lost her pocket*: “such isolated, disconnected events and characters appearing without introduction are far from uncommon” (2000, p. 24).

The role of rhyme in L1 literacy

There is strong support for the role of rhyme in furthering L1 literacy: “the experiences which a child has with rhyme before he goes to school might have a considerable effect on his success later on in learning to read and to write” (Bradley and Bryant, 1983, p. 419). Cook highlights the role of rhyme and rhythm as “an aid to, even a precondition, of literacy” (2000, p.26). Similarly, Wolf provides a powerful argument in favour of the role of rhymes in L1 literacy: “Tucked inside *Hickory, dickory, dock*, a mouse ran up the clock and other rhymes can be found a host of potential aids to sound awareness- alliteration, assonance, rhyme, repetition. Alliterative and rhyming sounds teach the young ear that words can sound similar because they share a first or last sound.” (2008, p. 99). Importantly, Wolf connects this ability to hear individual phonemes to the facilitation of literacy.

Can rhymes also be used to foster L2 literacy?

Some of the techniques which foster L1 literacy could also be exploited for L2 learners of English. Referring to L1 learners of English, Goswami and Bryant remind us that “there are other speech units to think about than the phoneme” (1990, p. 47). Here they refer to onset and rime, which mean the division of sound within the syllable that is larger than the phoneme and shorter than the syllable, that is, the beginning of the syllable, referring to the onset, and the end of the syllable, referring to the rime (p.3). Children make generalizations based on onset and rime, and this explains why it is easier for them to form categories on the basis of an onset and rime such as *str* and *ing*, than *stri* and *ng* (p.77). This distinction commonly used by L1 learners could also be introduced to L2 learners. L1 learners learn to distinguish between onset and rime due to the abundance of rhyme in their daily exposure to songs, advertisements, and nursery rhymes. This rich exposure is typically unavailable to L2 learners, and will therefore examples of rhyme need to be provided in the L2 classroom.

However, teachers may consider that traditional English nursery rhymes are not meaningful for L2 learners. L2 learners differ from L1 learners in a multitude of ways, not least in that there is reduced input and interaction in their environment and less opportunity to make sense of apparently nonsensical verse. For these learners, there are alternatives to traditional rhymes, which nevertheless preserve their important linguistic features. Rhyme also features in Carolyn Graham’s (1978, 1986) wealth of chants for L2 English learners. These present contemporary language in familiar contexts, set to rhythms which highlight the prosody of spoken English. Furthermore, much of popular music, from its inception in the 1960’s to the present, is similarly characterized by the essential features of rhyme, alliteration, and rhythms which, like traditional rhymes, present an exaggerated prosody of spoken English.

Emotional engagement

One of the tenets of extensive reading is the importance of affect. Day and Bamford contrast the purposes of intensive and extensive reading, the former to translate and answer questions, and the latter to get information and enjoy (1998, p. 123).

Clearly, not only extensive reading, but also extensive listening should provide the listeners with a sense of enjoyment to facilitate retention of the linguistic features in their memory. Emotional engagement is recommended as a useful tool to aid the memory (Willis, 2006). A skilful practitioner can introduce rhyme in the context of verse or song in order to encourage the enjoyment and therefore retention of the material presented in both extensive listening and reading.

Frequency of Listening

Manfred Spitzer recommends frequent short periods of practising a new skill rather than long irregular ones: “neural networks digest the new input with every repetition, thereby changing the weights of the synaptic connections – that is, learning.” (1999, p. 204) If this reasoning is applied to the teaching of rhyme to English learners, who are partaking in a curriculum which contains a range of other important subjects, this suggests that short daily exposure to rhyme would be more effective than a weekly lesson of longer duration.

When to start?

Clearly exposure to rhyme alone will not produce the equivalent results to being immersed in an L1 environment. Cook warns against the “popular misconception” (2010, p. 133) that children can acquire an L2 at school in the same way as children who function in bilingual environments before puberty. However it is recommended here to provide children in the early years of elementary school with short regular exposure to English rhyme to provide them with at least a better prospect than at present. Spitzer refers to children’s “phonetic maps on which only the phonemes that have been represented are actually heard. Once the map has been formed, it becomes increasingly difficult to change it.” (1999, p. 215). The phonetic map for a second language is characterized by individual variation, so it is not assumed that the exposure to rhyme will produce a uniform result for all children. However many children will benefit from this kind of exposure in the elementary school years. This will provide a foundation for the progressively difficult reading comprehension skills that are required in later years. The repetition, grammatical parallelisms, vocabulary and pronunciations that are presented in rhymes will serve as a model of

those that are encountered in the different context of the more formal texts in successive stages of their schooling.

Recommendations

The demanding elementary school curriculum in Japan may not afford the time for extended periods of English instruction. Furthermore there are those who oppose the introduction of L2 English because they fear this may take away from the time devoted to Japanese literacy instruction. (eg: Otsu, 2007). In recognition of these concerns, it is not proposed here that significant time blocks be devoted to L2 English instruction. Rather, short and yet regular listening to rhyme for elementary school children is suggested as a way to introduce the distinctive segmental and non-segmental features of English pronunciation. The result is not anticipated to be equivalent to that of L1 education. As Jenkins reminds us, “A ‘native-like’ accent is not necessary for intelligibility in EIL [English as an International Language]” (2000, p. 207). However it is hoped that many children will develop the ability to discriminate between onset and rime, prosodic awareness, and the concomitant awareness of grammatical boundaries, and that this will facilitate their path into L2 English extensive reading.

Finally, Walter’s (2008) recommendation that learners form a better mental representation of spoken language needs to be applied to Japanese learners participating in extensive reading programmes. If these learners too can utilize the phonological loop when reading they will be able to more accurately and effectively store the last two seconds of what they have read, and keep this in the working memory in order to process larger stretches of text. Extensive listening to rhyme in the early years is suggested as a means of helping children develop an auditory image of written language.

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