The Effects of Nursery Rhymes on EFL Learners' Vocabulary Knowledge

Natnaree Saibauthong / Supaporn Yimwilai
Faculty of Humanities, Srinikharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand
E-mail: Natnaree.sai@g.swu.ac.th

Abstract

This study investigated the effects of nursery rhymes on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge. The objectives were: 1) to study the effects of nursery rhymes on EFL learners' English vocabulary knowledge, and 2) to compare the effects of nursery rhymes on EFL third-grade learners' vocabulary knowledge to those of EFL fourth-grade learners' vocabulary knowledge. The participants included fifty-seven learners from a private primary school in Kanchanaburi province. The participants were chosen using simple random sampling and were divided into two groups: 29 third-grade learners and 28 fourth-grade learners. These two groups of learners were taught by lesson plans based on nursery rhymes. The instruments employed in the study were: 1) lesson plans based on nursery rhymes, and 2) an English vocabulary test. Mean score, standard deviation, the *t*-test analysis, and the analysis of covariance were used to analyze the quantitative data. The results reveal that nursery rhymes positively impact EFL learners to improve their vocabulary knowledge. When compared English vocabulary knowledge of both groups, no statistically significant differences were found ($F = 1.56$, $p > 0.05$). This pointed out that nursery rhymes have effects on different background learners.

Keywords: Nursery rhymes, EFL learners, Vocabulary, Vocabulary knowledge

Introduction

Learning English seems to be the difficulty of EFL learners because they are facing several obstacles in developing English. According to British Council (2021), EFL learners are students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This means EFL learners are a group of students whose English is not their mother language. Some experts specified the five difficulties which block students to succeed in English (Abolfathiasl & Abdullah, 2015). These obstacles are insufficient vocabulary knowledge, the notoriety of English grammar, the arduousness and inconsistence of pronunciation, cultural differences, and the variations of English (Abolfathiasl & Abdullah, 2015; Alaraj, 2017). Among these obstacles, inadequate vocabulary is considered as the most crucial problem because to succeed in studying English depends on vocabulary possessed by a language learner (Jadoon et al., 2020).

Generally, Thai students spend a significant length of time studying English from elementary school to university; however, their English proficiency is still questionable. Comparing the total scores for TOEFL iBT among Asian countries, the score of Thailand was 78. It was lower than Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, members of ASEAN (Education Testing Service, 2017). This shows that even though Thai students have been supported to study English for several years, the results are showing in the opposite way. There are experts identified that one of the biggest

difficulties for Thai students in learning English vocabulary is the limitation of vocabulary knowledge (Saengpakdeejit, 2014). According to the study of Wiriyachitra (2003), Thai students could not speak English naturally because they did not have various circumstances to collect new words by sharing English conversations with others. Moreover, there are additional factors that obstruct Thai students to be successful in learning English vocabulary. One of these barriers is a lack of motivation and enjoyment in classroom (Hossain, 2021). There are several papers discussing the motivation in learning, and some works declared that enjoyment and amusement have a powerful effect on students' learning, memory, and communication skills (Hernik & Jaworska, 2018; Schuitema et al., 2016). There are also earlier studies suggested that nursery rhymes, songs, or games are the need of the classroom (Ara, 2009: 162). Some experts prove that the influence of emotions had effects on learning, and enjoyment and happiness led to a positive effect on learning, memory, and social behavior (Hernik & Jaworska, 2018). The reason why teachers should bring entertainment into the classroom is that when students feel enjoyable, they will feel relaxed and able to learn. According to Ara (2009: 161-172), one of the best ways of drawing students' attention in the language classroom is to create the joyful classroom using activities, songs, rhymes, and games.

According to "Oxford English dictionary online" (2002), the word "nursery" refers to "a place where young children are cared for while their parents are at work," and the word "rhyme" refers to "a word that has the same sound or ends with the same sound as another word." The word nursery rhymes are extensively used to refer to a normal tradition poem or song for small children. Elaine (2000: 3) defines, the meaning of nursery rhymes that they are verses told or sung to little children. Similarly, Pratama (2017: 1) states that nursery rhymes are known as verse often sung for children. In addition, nursery rhymes are normal poems that easily found in local area and the language used in rhymes are a specific language depends on each community (York, 2011). To sum up, nursery rhymes are referred to short poems or songs normally sung to little children, and generally found in a local community. The language used will rely on the native community where nursery rhymes were created.

Nursery rhymes play a significant role in learning vocabulary knowledge. According to Harper (2011), students who listen to nursery rhymes will be exposed to the rich vocabulary. Nursery rhymes are the store of vocabulary; students will learn new vocabulary and understand how to articulate them (Bryant et al., 1989; Kenny, 2005). Moreover, Nursery rhymes consist of various simple words, and this characteristic help children to expand their knowledge of vocabulary, and they are capable to select words to apply in their daily lives. According to Kenny (2005), listening to nursery rhymes, students can learn vocabulary, especially words about people, places and ideas which would be constructed for their background of knowledge. This will enlighten children to enlarge a store of words (Shwetha & Phil, 2013).

Furthermore, nursery rhymes can be the valuable resources to engage student in the classroom because of the merriment, and students' basic skills will be advanced (Shwetha & Phil, 2013). According to York (2011), nursery rhymes are divided into many lines, and in each rhyme consists OF the special beats. These beats can attract children's attention. As Džanić and Pejić (2016: 40-54) support that

nursery rhymes, songs, and chants affect children's enjoyment, and their English proficiency will develop as a consequence. Similarly, May (2019) proposes that nursery rhymes serve as ideal teaching material to entertain a classroom; they can engage children by supporting their emotional development as well as improving the classroom atmosphere.

Some experts conducted the studies which are related with the teaching by using nursery rhymes. For example, Hery and Arshad (2020) conducted the research to examine and explain the result of using nursery rhymes to enhance young English learners' vocabulary knowledge in Indonesia. Two English teachers and eighty students from two elementary schools located in Depok-Sleman, Yogyakarta were involved in the study. The subjects were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group was taught English by using nursery rhymes, whereas the control group was taught by using traditional method. The study lasted eight weeks. Pre-test and post-test were used as the instruments to collect the data for analysis. The result revealed that the use of nursery rhymes significantly improved students' vocabulary knowledge. The students from experimental group also performed substantially better in English vocabulary test. Therefore, this study suggested that the use of nursery rhymes can be a tool to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge.

Additionally, there are some studies on teaching vocabulary in Thailand. For instance, the study of Xiaofei and Modehiran (2019) were to: 1) investigate what extent the vocabulary knowledge of the seventh grade Thai students improved after participating vocabulary teaching using picture storytelling, and 2) explore the students' opinions about vocabulary teaching using picture storytelling. The participants were forty seventh-grade students studying in a public Thai school. The instruments employed in this study were 1) a test, and 2) a questionnaire. The data were analyzed by the paired-sample t–test, means, and standard deviation. The results revealed that: 1) the post-test mean score was higher than the pre-test mean score at a 0.05 level of significance, and 2) the result of the questionnaire indicated the average 4.1 of agreement which means students had positive opinions about vocabulary learning using picture storytelling. In conclusion, there are several research studies focusing on teaching vocabulary and using nursery rhymes to enhance students in learning English both in international countries and in Thailand. Nevertheless, Thai students who study English as EFL learners are still facing the obstacle in learning English because they are inadequate vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, this study proposes to study the effects of nursery rhymes on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge.

This study could benefit students, educational staff, parents, and other research. The study might serve as an instruction and reference for the students undertaking related studies, and this study would serve as guidelines that would be the reference in the future study.

Research Objectives

1. To study the effects of nursery rhymes on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge.

2. To compare the effects of nursery rhymes on EFL third-grade learners' vocabulary knowledge to those of EFL fourth-grade learners' vocabulary knowledge.

Methodology

1. The Population and Participants

The population were sixty-four third-grade learners and fourth-grade learners from a private school in Kanchanaburi province. The participants were fifty-seven learners from two classes: third-grade learners (29 learners) and fourth-grade learners (28 learners) selected by simple random sampling. The reasons of selecting these students were: a) this level of students seem to appreciate learning through nursery rhymes (Prosic-Santovac, 2015), b) students in this age are the proper groups to start learning how to use the word parts and perceive the meaning of vocabulary knowledge (Cynthia & Johnson, 2009 as cited in Kusumawati & Widiati, 2017), and c) according to the scores of an English test in the second semester of the academic year 2021, the score of English vocabulary test of the students were lower than other English proficiency tests.

2. Instruments

The instruments used in this study were: 1) lesson plans based on nursery rhymes, and 2) an English vocabulary test.

The lesson plans were designed by the researcher to teach English vocabulary knowledge. The teaching vocabulary methods of Marzano (2019) was employed as a framework to design the lesson plans. Specifically, the teaching methods were divided into six stages, including 1) Explain 2) Restate 3) Show 4) Discuss 5) Refine and reflect, and 6) Apply in learning games.

During the Explain stage, the teacher provided an explanation, description, or example of the new words by using nursery rhymes to introduce and present the words to the students. In the Restate stage, the teacher focused on assigning students to work on the assignment 1 to recall the words that students had learnt through nursery rhymes. In the Show stage, students were requested to construct a picture, graphic or symbols referring to the target words that they had learnt on the worksheets 2. In the Discuss stage, teacher played a role as a facilitator of an activity which encouraged students to review and discuss the vocabulary that they had reviewed, in which they noted in their notebooks. The students were asked to do the activity by following the teacher's instruction. In the Refine and reflect stage, students worked in a pair or small groups. This activity encouraged students to interact together. In the Apply in learning games stage, some games were used to energize and remind the students to the words that students had learnt through nursery rhymes.

The lesson plans were determined the content validity by the experts using the criteria of IOC (Index of Item Objective Congruence). Meanwhile, the reliability coefficient Cronbach's was used to analyze the data of lesson plans. In addition, the reliability was also verified by testing lesson plans with students who are not the participants.

To evaluate students' vocabulary knowledge, an English vocabulary test was designed. There were three parts: meaning, spelling, and the use of words. There are ten multiple choice questions and ten items of matching pictures with words. This test was determined the reliability and reliability by the specialists and was tested on students who were not involved in this study.

3. Data Collections

This study lasted seven weeks. The students were asked to complete consent forms and the pre-test at the first week. From the second week to the sixth week, two groups of students were taught by lesson plans based on nursery rhymes. After that, they were asked to do post-test at the seventh week.

4. Data Analysis

The data collected from pre-test and post-test were analyzed by mean scores, standard deviations, the dependent *t*-test analysis, and the analysis of covariance. The dependent *t*-test analysis was used to compare whether there were any differences in the pre-test and post-test mean scores of the learners in both groups. Meanwhile, the analysis of covariance was used to compare whether there were any differences in the post-test mean scores between two groups of learners.

Results
1. EFL Learners' Vocabulary Knowledge

To investigate the effects of nursery rhymes on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge. The data from vocabulary test including pre-test and post-test were analyzed by mean scores, standard deviations, and the dependent *t*-test analysis. The results are shown in Table 1.

Tables 1 Descriptive Statistic of EFL Learners' Vocabulary Knowledge Mean Scores

Group	Pre-test		Post-test	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Third-Grade Learners	8.72	2.30	16.93	1.93
Fourth-Grade Learners	10.97	2.72	16.59	2.56

According to Table 1, the results reveal that the pre-test mean score of the third-grade learners was 8.72 (*SD* = 2.30), and the pre-test mean score of the fourth-grade learners was 10.97 (*SD* = 2.72). The post-test mean score of the third-grade learners was 16.93 (*SD* = 1.93), and the post-test mean score of the fourth-grade learners was 16.59 (*SD* = 2.56).

In order to determine the effects of the nursery rhymes on all EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge, the data were analyzed by mean scores, standard deviations, and the dependent *t*-test analysis. The results are shown in Table 2.

Tables 2 The Comparison of the Pre-test Mean Score to Post-test Mean Scores

Time	N	*Mean*	*Max*	*Min*	*SD*	*t-value*	*df*	*p-value*
After learning English vocabulary through nursery rhymes	57	16.76	20	6	2.25			
Before learning English vocabulary through nursery rhymes	57	9.84	16	3	2.74	16.30	57	0.00**

***$p < 0.05$

According to Table 2, the results reveal that there were statistically significant differences in the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test (t (57) = 16.30, $p > 0.05$). The pre-test mean score was 9.84 ($SD = 2.74$) while the post-test mean score was 16.76 ($SD = 2.25$). The results reveal the post-test mean score was significantly higher than the pre-test mean score. The results reveal that teaching English vocabulary through nursery rhymes had potential in developing EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge.

2. Comparing the effects of nursery rhymes on EFL third-grade learners' vocabulary knowledge to those of EFL fourth-grade learners' vocabulary knowledge.

To compare the effects of teaching English vocabulary through nursery rhymes on third-grade learners' vocabulary knowledge to those of fourth-grade learners' vocabulary knowledge, the analysis of covariance was used to find out the results. The results are shown in Table 3 and 4

To compare the mean scores between two groups, estimate marginal means was used to find out the results. The mean scores of both groups were adjusted. The adjusted and unadjusted means for the third-grade learners and fourth-grade learners are shown in Table 3.

Tables 3 Unadjusted and Covariance Adjusted Descriptive Statistic

Group	Before Treatment			After Treatment (Unadjusted)		After Treatment (Adjusted)	
	N	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SE*
Third-Grade Learners	29	8.72	2.30	16.93	1.93	17.16	0.43
Fourth-Grade Learners	28	10.97	2.72	16.59	2.56	16.36	0.43

Tables 4 The Analysis of Covariance of the Third-Grade Learners and the Fourth-Grade Learners

Source of Variance	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Before Treatment	14.63	1	14.63	2.95	0.09
Between Groups	7.70	1	7.70	1.56	0.22
Error	272.27	55	4.95		

***$p < 0.05$

According to Table 4, the analysis of covariance was conducted to compare the effects of teaching English vocabulary through nursery rhymes on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge of third-grade learners to those of fourth-grade learners. The analysis reveals that there were no statistically significant differences (F = 1.56, $p > 0.05$) in the mean score of third-grade students (M = 17.16, SE = 0.43) and the mean score of fourth-grade learners (M = 16.36, SE = 0.43). This points out that the effects of teaching English vocabulary through nursery rhymes on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge on the third-grade learners and the fourth-grade learners were similar. Therefore, it can be concluded that teaching English vocabulary through nursery rhymes has effects on different background learners.

Discussions

According to the findings of the study, the post-test mean score was higher than that of the pre-test. This revealed that EFL learners' English vocabulary knowledge was improved by nursery rhymes. The results of this study were in line with the study of Nurhudayah (2018) which reported that using nursery rhymes was effective in teaching vocabulary. Nurhudayah (2018) implemented using nursery rhymes in teaching vocabulary to ESL learners (English as a second language), but the present study used nursery rhymes in teaching English vocabulary to EFL learners (English as a foreign language). This pointed out that nursery rhymes are able to develop both ESL and EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge.

According to the findings from Table 4 which reveal that there were no statistically significant differences in the mean score of EFL third-grade learners and the mean score of EFL fourth-grade learners. Although these two groups of learners had different levels of vocabulary knowledge, teaching English vocabulary through nursery rhymes can similarly improve students' vocabulary knowledge. This can be concluded that teaching English vocabulary through nursery rhymes was effective in heightening vocabulary knowledge of students who have different background.

According to the results of this study, teaching English vocabulary through nursery rhymes assisted learners to improve their vocabulary knowledge. Generally, nursery rhymes consist of various simple words, special beats, and rhythms which are useful enough to enhance students in learning English vocabulary and to draw students' attention in classroom. Therefore, there are two major reasons to explain the results. Firstly, nursery rhymes consist of simple words that students are able to face or hear in their daily lives. According Kenny (2005), nursery rhymes can provide vocabulary relating to places, people, and ideas which would heighten students'

background of vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, Dodson (1981: 325-346) stated that the language used in nursery rhymes are the language that young children can catch up easily, and those words are short enough to draw children's attention. In this study, nursery rhymes played a significant role as the resourceful tool. Nursery rhymes assisted students to gain several words due to the simplicity of each word. In other word nursery rhymes consist of rich ordinary vocabulary which benefit students to absorb a lot of words. Secondly, teaching vocabulary through nursey rhymes offers a merriment atmosphere in the classroom. According to York (2011), the uniqueness of nursery rhymes is the special beats along with each rhyme, these beats can allure children's attention. Similarly, According to Kenny (2005), the rhyme, the rhythmic, and the melodic flow of language is joyful. In the present study, nursery rhymes motivated students to participate in the classroom activities. This is because the merriment of nursery rhymes. They transformed classroom to cheerful, and this leads the learners to be more interested in the lessons. Similar to the ideas of Shwetha (2013), teaching vocabulary through nursery rhymes offers a non-threatening environment for students.

In conclusion, because of the merriment and the rich vocabulary through nursery rhymes. These characteristics led learners to develop their vocabulary knowledge.

Recommendations

Although the results of the study confirmed the positive effects of teaching English vocabulary through nursery rhymes on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge, it would be interesting to conduct the further studies by using nursery rhymes to enhance other skills. Additionally, it might be advantageous to conduct a research study with students from different levels. The present study applied specific five nursery rhymes to teach learners. It might be interesting to select other nursery rhymes in teaching other skills to learners.

Acknowledgements

References

Abolfathiasl, H., & Abdullah, A. (2015). Pragmatic consciousness-raising activities and EFL learners' speech act performance of 'making suggestions.' *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, *6*(2), 333-342.

Alaraj, M. M. (2017). EFL speaking acquisition: Identifying problems, suggesting learning strategies and examining their effect on students' speaking fluency. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention*, *4*(1), 3215-3221.

Ara, S. (2009). Use of songs, rhymes and games in teaching English to young learners in Bangladesh. *Dhaka University Journal of Linguistics*, *2*(3), 161-172.

British Council. (2021). *How to teach English as a lingua franca (ELF)*. https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/how-teach-english-lingua-franca-elf

Bryant, P. E., Bradley, L., Maclean, M., & Crossland, J. (1989). Nursery rhymes, phonological skills and reading. *Journal Of Child Language, 16*(2), 407-428.

Dodson, F. (1981). *Give your child a head start in reading*. Simon and Schuster.

Džanić, N. D., & Pejić, A. (2016). The effect of using songs on young learners and their motivation for learning English. *New Trends in Social and Liberal Sciences (NETSOL): An Interdisciplinary Journal, 1*(2), 40-54.

Education Testing Service. (2017). *Test and score data summary for TOEFL iBT tests January 2017-December 2017 test data*. Education Testing Service (ETS).

Elaine, D. (2000). *The importance of nursery rhymes* (Paper no. ED442117). Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC) Database. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED442117.pdf

Harper, L. J. (2011). Nursery rhyme knowledge and phonological awareness in preschool children. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education, 7*(1), 65-78.

Hernik, J., & Jaworska, E. (2018). The effect of enjoyment on learning. In A. L. Martínez, I. C. Torres, & L. G. Chova (Eds.), *12th International Technology, Education and Development (INTED2018) Conference Proceedings* (pp. 508-514). IATED, Valencia, Spain.

Hery, I. S. P., & Arshad, I. (2020). Using nursery rhymes to enhance vocabulary among young English learners in Indonesia. *International Journal of Management, 11*(9), 212-226.

Hossain, M. A. (2021). English as a foreign language: Insights from a Public University in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation, 4*(1), 234-237.

Jadoon, A. U. R. R., Chishti, M. I. Afzaal, M., & Afza, T. (2020). Challenges faced by newly inducted teachers implementing revised English curriculum in Pakistan. *English Language Teaching, 13*(7), 52-66.

Kenny, A. (2005). *Philosophy of language*. Blackwell.

Kusumawati, E., & Widiati, U. (2017). The effects of vocabulary instructions on students' reading comprehension across cognitive styles in ESP. *Journal of Education and Practice, 8*(2), 175-184.

Marzano, R. J. (2019). *Marzano's six steps for teaching academic vocabulary*. Texas Education Agency.

May, B. N. (2019). The rhyme and reason for nursery rhymes in the elementary music classroom. *General Music Today, 33*(2), 90-96.

Nurhudayah. (2018). *The effectiveness of teaching vocabulary by using nursery rhymes to the First Grade Students at Mts Ddi Pattojo Soppeng*. [Undergraduate 's thesis]. Alauddin State Islamic University.

Oxford English dictionary online. (2002). Oxford University Press. https://www.oed.com/

Pratama, I. D. (2017). Meaning and form in nursery rhymes translation. *Humanus: Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu-ilmu Humaniora, 16*(1), 1-12.

Prosic-Santovac, D. (2015). Making the match: Traditional nursery rhymes and teaching English to modern children. *Children's Literature in English Language Education* (*CLELE*) *Journal, 3*(1), 25-48.

Saengpakdeejit, R. (2014). Strategies for dealing with vocabulary learning problems by Thai university students. *Silpakorn University Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts, 14*(1), 147-167.

Schuitema, J., Peetsma, T., & van der Veen, I. (2016). Longitudinal relations between perceived autonomy and social support from teachers, and students' self-regulated learning and achievement. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *49*, 32-45.

Shwetha, R., & Phil, M. (2013). Nursery rhymes as an effective instructional material for young language learners. *ELT Journal*, 772-780.

Wiriyachitra, A. (2003). Thai teachers' role in teaching: Motivating students and guiding their learning. *Thai TESOL Focus, 16*(2), 25-27.

Xiaofei, H., & Modehiran, P. (2019). Vocabulary teaching using picture storytelling to improve English vocabulary knowledge of grade 7 Thai students. *An Online Journal of Education, 14*(2), 1-13.

York, J. (2011). Music and MEXT: How songs can help primary school English teachers teach and their students learn. *Language Teacher, 35*(4), 62-67.