

"Teacher, Teacher, can't Catch Me!": Teaching Vocabulary and Grammar using Nursery Rhymes to Children for Whom English is an Additional Language

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This article explores how to use nursery rhymes to teach vocabulary and grammar to young children who are learning English as an additional language.

Three little monkeys sitting on a tree, Teasing Mr Crocodile, 'can't catch me!' Along came the crocodile, quiet as can be, and...SNAP! Two little monkeys sitting on a tree...

🕝 n all, 28 delighted faces recited the simple counting rhyme while doing actions. I manipulated the key ■visuals—monkey masks, a crocodile, and a large tree branch made from colored card. We practiced this rhyme almost daily for a few weeks in late winter in our pre-kindergarten class. Anna*, a 4-year-old from Poland, had not spoken in English in class since school started in September. She was in the silent period of language acquisition. Despite not speaking, she enjoyed participating in class activities through gesture. One day in early March, I was on duty in the playground. Anna ran up to me, smiling, "teacher, teacher, can't catch me!" she exclaimed, placing her palms near her head in a mocking fashion as we had done so many times pretending to be monkeys when reciting the rhyme. I was amazed. These were the first words she spoke in English and she had taken them from the rhyme and used them appropriately in another context! She clearly demonstrated that when language learning is enjoyable and meaningful, it can be successful. It made me think about how nursery

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rhymes can be a powerful teaching approach for teaching vocabulary and grammar for children who are learning English as an additional language.

I taught Anna's class for 2 years, from pre-kindergarten through to kindergarten in a highly diverse setting. The children all entered formal schooling at age 4 or 5 as pre-kindergarten is mandatory in the Irish school system. All of the children in Anna's class were multilingual as they all spoke at least one home language and also learned both English and Irish in school. There were 48 different home languages spoken by families in our elementary school and within Anna's class the children spoke Lithuanian, Russian, Hungarian, Mandarin, Tamil, Telugu, Albanian, Romanian, Arabic, Yoruba, Igbo, Serbian, Polish, Latvian, and Hindi.

Many might be surprised to read that this level of diversity exists in Ireland, which was predominately mono-cultural prior to the expansion of the European Union and the evolution of a period of economic prosperity known as the *Celtic tiger* in the late 1990s. Since then, non-native speakers of English make up approximately 11% of our school population but the spread across districts is uneven. This has resulted in schools such as the one described where up to 95% of

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the children are non-native speakers of English while other elementary schools have very little diversity in their classrooms. In Ireland, non-native speakers of English are described as "children for whom English is an additional language" (EAL pupils) in policy documents (NCCA, 2019) as it highlights their plurilingualism. Although "emergent bilingual" is a

term used in recent literature (see for example Rowe, 2018), it does not highlight the unique language context in Irish schools where all children receive instruction in two languages from age 4 (English and Irish) and many are also proficient in one or more home languages as well. This represents a challenge for teachers, who, like myself, found themselves in classrooms with young children who have varying levels of English but who all need to catch up with the moving target of their peers (Cummins, 2001).

Indeed, 30% of EAL pupils have not learned English in any other context before entering elementary school (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Hence, developing engaging and accessible methods for teaching language to the young EAL pupils in my class became a priority in my practice. In this article, I will share the rationale for using nursery rhymes with young EAL pupils and how I used them to teach vocabulary and grammar in my classroom.

Rationale for using Nursery Rhymes in Diverse Classrooms

Children like Anna, who are learning English as an additional language while in school, need a literacyrich classroom that provides a safe, risk-free environment to produce and explore a new language (Anthony, 2008; Guilfoyle & Mistry, 2013). This is referred to, in second language acquisition theory, as the "affective filter." According to Krashen (1985), language learning will only occur if the child feels happy and safe in the classroom. Frequent use of nursery rhymes in instruction encourages the development of an informal teaching tone, playfulness, and engagement which can encourage those just beginning to learn English (Bland, 2015; Bauer & Manyak, 2008; Toohey, Waterstone, Jule-Lemke, 2000).

The "input hypothesis" (Krashen, 1985) refers to what we "give" to pupils (Anthony, 2008). Anna, as a child beginning to learn English, needs plentiful

high-quality input without undue pressure for language output (Gersten et al., 2005). There is a general consensus that children who are learning English as an additional language lack vocabulary knowledge in English and that this dearth can impact their academic achievement across the curriculum (Proctor et al., 2005). Oral proficiency can often be "over-

PAUSE AND PONDER

- Do you currently use nursery rhymes or rhyming poems to teach vocabulary to young EAL pupils?
- Have you considered the range of vocabulary and grammar knowledge that might be gleaned from simple rhyming poems or nursery rhymes?
- How do you make new vocabulary "comprehensible" to young EAL pupils?

looked in instruction" (August & Shanahan, 2006, p.4), despite its critical importance. As nursery rhymes can contain diverse vocabulary and varied syntax, they can provide opportunities for the teacher to model different levels of vocabulary and abstract grammar in an accessible manner. It is also critically important that the input is comprehensible to EAL pupils (Garcia, 2003; Krashen, 1985). As nursery rhymes lend themselves naturally to gestures and

dramatization, and can be accompanied with visuals and props, they can capture and maintain a young EAL pupil's attention and be a powerful method of instruction. Thus, children like Anna can participate in class and understand the material while developing the confidence to begin speaking in English. Nursery rhymes are an engaging instructional tool as the rhyming patterns appeal to young learners because they "satisfy the cognitive need for pattern of this age group" (Bland, 2015, p.152). Nursery rhymes also depict a simple story as they reflect a meaningful narrative which is particularly important for young children learning an additional language (Bland, 2015).

Teaching Approaches Using Movement

The silent period is a distinct listening phase of second language acquisition where children do not speak but can indicate their understanding through non-verbal communicative means (Guilfoyle & Mistry, 2013). As children emerge from the silent period, they move into the early production stage of language acquisition where they make their first attempts to speak in the target language (Akhavan, 2014; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Children in the early production stage of language acquisition will also rely heavily on movement and gesture to understand and be understood. Indeed, it has been shown that incorporating movement, gesture, and expression

into lessons can enhance the language comprehension and memory of young EAL pupils (Kress, 2009; Moses, 2013). Mages (2006) also concluded that dramatization enables children to grasp decontextualized language as it enables them to draw on their conceptual knowledge while grappling with new vocabulary and provides a gateway for language transfer. Indeed, according to Greenfader et al., (2014), "The very learning of words relies on experiences of the senses, of actions and emotions" (p.189).

Total physical response (TPR) involves children using their bodies and minds to demonstrate understanding. It is particularly useful for children in the silent period as the focus is on receptive rather than expressive language (O'Duibhir & Cummins, 2012). Multimodal learning that incorporates speech, gesture, and expression can have "significant cognitive and social benefits from the engaging, interactive and meaningful learning" (Moses, 2013, p.74). Indeed, Anna enjoyed participating in lessons non-verbally through gesture and facial expressions during the months she spent in the silent period. When she moved into the early production stage, she revealed that she had learned quite a vast amount of vocabulary and grammar knowledge from the nursery rhymes that we had learned and began to recite them quite accurately with the rest of her peers very soon after the incident in the playground that I shared in the introduction.

Robust vocabulary instruction (Beck et al., 2002) generally begins with a contextualized, repetitive, meaningful introduction to an unfamiliar word. For example, when a new word was identified in a nursery rhyme, I might have used gesture, movement, or facial expression to demonstrate its meaning. I would have asked the children to repeat the word or phrase while performing the gesture or movement. For example, when I was introducing the rhyme I have ten fingers to the class, I started by modeling counting each finger and then performing each action. Gestures and movement are particularly useful for teaching verbs and adjectives, for example "squeeze," "open," and "lift" were clearly understood by my EAL pupils by using gesture.

I have ten fingers, they all belong to me, I can make them do things,
Would you like to see?
I can squeeze them tight,
I can open them wide,
I can lift them up high,
I can make them all hide!

The emphasis on rhythmic enunciation can aid correct pronunciation of new vocabulary words

while making movements while saying the rhyme can help to physically define the phrase as a language chunk (Greenfader et al., 2014). For example, in *Three little monkeys*, the phrase "can't catch me!" is defined by placing one's hands beside one's ears and wiggling one's fingers in a mocking fashion.

Using Visuals and Props

According to Wasik (2006), using "real objects or props and active demonstrations can help children understand the meaning of words" (p.70). Visuals and props can be very useful in capturing and focusing young EAL pupil's attention in introducing a new rhyme. For example, when I taught the rhyme Three little monkeys, I used the visuals in Figure 1 which could be manipulated. When I taught Two little birdies, I created movable birds and a wall from colored card as can be seen in Figure 2. These props enable the content of the rhyme to become "comprehensible" to young EAL pupils (Herrell & Jordan, 2011; Krashen, 1985).

Two little birdies, Sitting on a wall, One named Peter, One named Paul, Fly away Peter,

Figure 1 Visuals for Three little monkeys



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

Figure 2
Visuals for Two little birdies



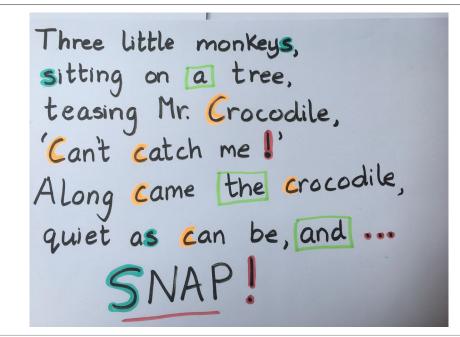
Fly away Paul, Come back Peter, Come back Paul!

Rhymes as a Meaningful Context for other Early Literacy Skills

The children's familiarity with the rhymes offered an excellent opportunity for the development of a range of early literacy skills in conjunction with their oral language development. The interaction with rhyming words and alliteration found in nursery rhymes can serve to heighten children's phonological awareness (Gillon, 2018) in a contextualized and meaningful manner by hearing and reciting the nursery rhymes but also by including oral rhyming cloze, where the children were encouraged to supply the rhyming couplets. For example, in the Two little birdies rhyme, I recited the first few lines but omitted "wall" to see whether the children could supply the rhyme.

Each rhyme was written on large chart paper so that we could hunt for letters and high-frequency words in a meaningful context. It also became a forum to develop the children's concepts about print such as top-to-bottom and left to right directionality, return sweep, and punctuation such as periods,

Figure 3
Using a Rhyme Chart for the Development of Reading Skills



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

exclamations marks, ellipses, bold print, and commas. For example, in the *Three little monkeys* chart (see Figure 3), we searched for the letter sound "c" and "s"; the high-frequency words "the," "and," and "a"; and the use of ellipses, exclamation marks, and bold print in text. I also created a smaller version of the rhyme that the children could illustrate and bring home to share with their parents.

Using Nursery Rhymes to Develop Oral Language Considering Vocabulary Words

Vocabulary knowledge is an important predictor of EAL pupil's academic achievement (Wessels, 2011). Vocabulary words can be grouped into three tiers (Beck et al., 2002). Tier 3 words are low-frequency words that are discipline specific, such as "amoeba." Tier 2 words are sophisticated words that appear in texts but are not always present in children's conversational vocabulary, for example "ancient." Tier 1 words are common everyday words that would be very familiar to native speakers of English, such as "clock." However, young children, like Anna, who are in the early stages of language acquisition may not have those words in their receptive or expressive vocabulary. However, the word will most likely represent a concept that the child already knows in their native language, but they do not know how to express it in English (Calderon, 2007).

Teachers should explore EAL pupils' prior knowledge before beginning to teach a rhyme (Herrara, Perrex, Escamilla, 2010). Asking questions about the topic of the rhyme and exploring their knowledge of the new vocabulary would be advised as a pre-assessment so that the lesson can be pitched appropriately. For example, when I taught Five little speckled frogs, tier 1 vocabularies such as "frog," "log," and "bug" were unfamiliar to some of my young EAL pupils and required discussion and the use of visuals before I introduced the rhyme.

Tier 2 words can also be found in rhymes. For example, Five little speckled frogs contain tier 2 words such as "delicious" and "speckled." In addition, a number of tier 2 words are prepositions and conjunctions such as at, into, so, if, then, within, and by, which are essential in understanding oral directions and written texts effectively (Calderon, 2007). These words are highly abstract in nature and thus are difficult for EAL pupils to learn. I found that nursery rhymes can provide a context to teach a preposition

Figure 4
Five Little Speckled Frogs



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

like "into" in an engaging manner using simple gesture and movable props (Figure 4).

Five little speckled frogs,
Sat on a speckled log,
Eating some very delicious bugs- Yum, yum!
One jumped into the pool, where it was nice and cool,
Now there are just four speckled frogs!

Cummins' (1991, 2016) linguistic interdependence hypothesis emphasizes the importance of connecting a pupils' home language to the language of instruction in the development of vocabulary. This theory is referred to as translanguaging in practice and promotes a positive learning environment for language learning (Brevik & Rindal, 2020; Garcia, 2014; Lee & Suarez, 2009). Therefore, I was conscious of including the children's home languages in instruction as often as possible as a "one space, one language" practice can stifle children's development across language (Bengochea & Gort, 2020, p.1). For example, when I was teaching the rhyme Teddy bear, Teddy bear, I asked a child how to say "teddy bear" in Romanian (his native language). We then substituted "ursulet" for "teddy bear" in the rhyme when we recited it a few times while performing the appropriate actions. Encouraging children to

connect new vocabulary in English with their native language can be helpful in retaining new learning as it enables the child to link a word that they already know to a new vocabulary. It can also enhance the affective filter when a child is aware that the teacher values his/her plurilingualism in the classroom.

Teddy bear, teddy bear, Ursulet, ursulet Turn around. Turn around. Ursulet, ursulet, Teddy bear, teddy bear, Touch the ground. Touch the ground. Teddy bear, teddy bear, Ursulet, ursulet, Show your shoe. Show your shoe. Teddy bear, teddy bear, Ursulet, ursulet, That will do! That will do!

We also discovered that many of the rhymes we explored in the classroom had been translated into other languages. For example, with the help of a Polish parent, we learned Head, shoulders, knees, and toes/ Głowa, ramiona, kolana, pięty in both English and Polish (see https://youtu.be/qmdcyRl8Pes). I also invited parents to share any rhymes or songs from their home languages that might relate to our crosscurricular themes. For example, when we were exploring the theme of "transport," a parent from India visited the classroom and shared a rhyme in Telugu about a train called Chuk chuk railu vastundi (see https://youtu.be/xN7CtvwuNcQ). Expanding vocabulary instruction across multiple languages emphasized how plurilingualism was valued in our classroom and in the school (Little & Kirwan, 2019).

Syntax

It is important to remember that simply learning words in isolation will not create a fluent speaker of English. EAL pupils need opportunities to learn all aspects of syntax such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, and how to ask and answer questions (Kersten, 2015). When choosing nursery rhymes, it is important to consider what types of language the rhyme offers and how you might communicate the meaning of each language component (Table 1). You might also wish to consider how you might extend the learning to other contexts. For example, when teaching Miss Polly had a dolly, I considered the different aspects of syntax contained in the nursery rhyme and how I could use the rhyme to extend

Table 1
Language that could be Learned using the Poem Miss
Polly had a dolly

Nouns	Verbs	
Dolly	Was sick	
Doctor	Called	
Bag	Come	
Hat	Came	
Door	Knocked	
Head	Looked	
Bed	Shook	
Paper	Said	
Bill	Put	
Pill	Wrote	
Prepositions	Adjectives	
With	Sick	
On	Quick	
At		
Pronouns?	Conjunctions	
His	So	
Her		
Who		

their knowledge in different ways. The nouns in this rhyme were easily taught using props such as a stethoscope to indicate the doctor, or a piece of paper to indicate the bill. I often found that my EAL pupils struggled with pronouns and thus, when we learned this rhyme, we often changed the gender of the "doctor" (played by a child) or the "dolly" (a classroom prop) to help the children differentiate between pronouns. Adjectives such as "sick" were portrayed through gesture. Verbs such as "called" and "knocked" would have been unfamiliar to many of the pupils so using an old cell phone as a prop, we played a game that involved a child taking the phone for an imaginary conversation and then saying, "I called...." In exploring the preposition "on," we played a game where different children were given direction to knock on the table, on the door, on the floor, and so forth.

Miss Polly had a dolly who was sick, sick, sick, So she called for the doctor to come quick, quick, quick, The doctor came with his bag and his hat, And he knocked on the door with a rat-a-tat-tat. He looked at the dolly and he shook his head, He said 'Miss Polly, put her straight to bed' He wrote on the paper for a pill, pill, pill, I'll be back in the morning with a bill, bill, bill!

Formulaic Expressions

Formulaic expressions are an important component in early language acquisition (McKay, 2006). Nursery rhymes contain formulaic chunks of language that can be useful in an EAL pupil's development of syntax, grammar, and vocabulary (Ellis, 2005). As nursery rhymes include age-appropriate, varied language, and repetitive lines, they enable EAL pupils to encounter chunks of language in meaningful contexts (Kersten, 2015). As these phrases that are initially rote learnt, they contribute to conversational fluency and eventually to rule-based competence (Ellis, 2005). Thus, learning and using these language chunks contribute to an understanding of grammar as EAL pupils internalize and then analyze fixed sequences (Myles, 2004; Skehan, 1998). This is why Anna could use "can't catch me!" successfully in a different context. Thus, nursery rhymes should form an essential part of initial language instruction for young children while prescriptive, traditional grammar teaching should be delayed until later years (Ellis, 2005). For example, if teaching the nursery

rhyme This is my house, EAL pupils might learn the useful language chunk "this is my/the..." or "outside there's a ...".

This is my house,
And this is the door,
The windows are shining
And so is the floor,
On top there's a chimney,
That points to the sky
Outside there's a roof,
That keeps everything dry!

Pronunciation

When teaching new vocabulary or formulaic chunks, it is important to remember to enunciate each word clearly and have the children repeat each phrase after hearing it. It is not helpful for EAL pupils to simply hear the nursery rhyme a few times and then begin to accompany the teacher in saying it. As many of the words and phrases are new to the children, there needs to be an emphasis placed on correct pronunciation so that language learning can be maximized.

Choosing Rhymes

The rhymes I chose to use reflected cross-curricular aims as they included key vocabulary that would

Table 2
Cross-curricular Links to Rhymes and Corresponding Children's Literature

Rhyme	Cross-curricular links	Example of corresponding children's literature
Three little monkeys	Math: exploring number 3 Science: jungle animals Socio-dramatic play: Jungle explorer's area	Donaldson, J. & Scheffler, A. (2016). <i>Monkey</i> Puzzle. London: Macmillan.
l have ten fingers	Math: counting 1–10	Stoll Walsh, E. (1995). <i>Mouse count.</i> New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing.
Two little Birdies	Math: number 2 Science: signs of spring, bird identification	Cousins, L. (2017). Hooray for birds! London: Candlewick Press.
Five little speckled frogs	Math: exploring number 5 Science: Life cycle of a frog	Voce, L. (1995). Over in the meadow. London Walker books.
Teddy bear	History: Toys as artefacts	Alborough, J. (2017). Where's my teddy? London: Walker Books.
Miss Polly	Social, Personal & Health Education: Staying well, the doctor Socio-dramatic play: The doctor/hospital	Ross, T. (2015). <i>I feel sick</i> . London: Andersen Press.
This is my house	Geography: Homes in our environment Construction block play	Yum, H. (2013). <i>This is our house</i> . New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

enable my all EAL pupils to access the curriculum at an appropriate level. Table 2 outlines how the rhymes discussed in this article linked to various aspects of the curriculum. I also used at least one piece of children's literature that would correspond with the over-arching theme. This enabled the children who had the lowest level of English to have opportunities to interact with the same key vocabulary on multiple occasions across the school day which developed their confidence in participating in lessons (Herrera & Murry, 2015).

Providing Playful Opportunities for Practice

According to Bland (2015), many "language teachers are often far too uneasy or unaware with regard to the need for repetition," despite the practice being of "vital importance" in the language learning environment (Bland, 2015, p.151). Repetition increases exposure to the sound system of language, thereby heightening phonological awareness (Gillon, 2018). It allows for greater word learning (Biermiller & Boote, 2006) and enhanced understanding of words (Bland, 2015). Therefore, it is important to repeat the nursery rhyme often as a whole class, but it can also be helpful to provide opportunities for the children to practice the nursery rhymes in other ways.

I created a "rhyme time" corner in my classroom where I placed the props, visuals, and scripts of each nursery rhyme in a box (Figure 5). This became a

Figure 5 "Rhyme Time" Area



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

choice area that the children could visit during our guided play hour. The children were very eager to choose a poem partner to re-enact their favorite nursery rhymes with. It became a favorite area in our classroom and gave the children an opportunity to develop mastery within a risk-free environment. Indeed, Wasik & Bond (2001) found that when children are taught vocabulary related to concrete objects and then are given an opportunity to play with these objects, they tend to retain the new vocabulary more than children who were not afforded an opportunity to practice new learning in this manner.

Language Expectations

The children in my classroom spoke English at varying levels of proficiency which developed across the school year. Anna, for example, began the school year in the silent period and entered the early production period in early spring, rapidly moving into the speech emergence stage within a very short period of time. She achieved intermediate fluency by the middle of her second year in school. While it generally takes children one to two years to achieve intermediate fluency, the rate at which their language develops across stages can vary significantly (Krashen, 1985). Our school population was constantly in transition and it was not unusual to have new pupils join the class at different stages of the year. For this reason, I always had to be mindful of catering for different stages of language acquisition in my teaching. Rhymes were very useful as they were accessible in different ways depending on a child's proficiency level. In Table 3, I outline the different expectations I had for the children in my class when I taught a rhyme according to their language acquisition stage.

Final Thoughts

The use of nursery rhymes to develop oral language, vocabulary, and grammar knowledge is particularly important in diverse classrooms as research indicates that literacy instruction for EAL pupils often tends to focus on the isolated skill and drill tasks (Gutierrex, 2001, Neufield & Fitzgerald, 2001, Bauer & Manyak, 2008). Nursery rhymes are a meaning-centered instructional activity and the use of visuals, gesture, and props allows the lesson to be comprehensible to all levels of language learners. It is important that EAL pupils learn a wide range of nursery rhymes that differ in semantic scope as this will affect breadth of

Table 3
Language Expectations

Language stage (Akhavan, 2014; Krashen & Terrell, 1983)	Language expectations
Pre-production/silent period	Actively participate in TPR to demonstrate understanding. Point to relevant visuals when appropriate. Respond to simple questions with gesture.
Early production	Repeat words/phrases with relevant actions. Say word/phrase when presented with visual/prop/gesture.
Speech emergence	Recite some words/phrases without help. Begin to use vocabulary in other contexts (read-aloud, curricular lessons, and in play).
Intermediate fluency	Recite rhyme independently (with group and in "rhyme time" area). Use new vocabulary with confidence in other contexts. Answer questions in relation to rhymes.

vocabulary and grammatical knowledge (Murphy, 2014). It is easy to return to familiar nursery rhymes regularly over time and this repetition is critical for the retention of new vocabulary. Indeed, Wasik (2006) reminds us of the importance of re-visiting new vocabulary over time, as "one common misconception is that once children hear a word and use it, they know it forever" (p.77). By developing a repertoire of nursery rhymes with a class, a teacher can easily revisit new vocabulary frequently as familiar rhymes can be recited during lesson transitions, before or after recess or as an inspirational and motivational start to the school day!

TAKE ACTION!

- 1. Examine the nursery rhymes or rhyming poems that you currently use in the classroom. Think about range of vocabulary and grammar knowledge each rhyme contains.
- 2. Consider how you will make the vocabulary and concepts contained in each nursery rhyme comprehensible to young EAL pupils. Gather visuals and props to make the poems "come alive."
- **3.** Use a "call and response" method to teach the rhymes to ensure appropriate pronunciation.
- **4.** Recite the nursery rhymes often using gestures, visuals, and props. Extend learning using the nursery rhyme as a starting point to explore different aspects of grammar.
- **5.** Create a "rhyme time" area in your classroom to allow the children to re-enact the nursery rhymes with their peers.

Conflict of Interest

None.

NOTE

*pseudonym.

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