



Using Nursery Rhymes to Improve Listening Comprehension Skill

Farid Abdullah Mufid^{✉1}, Arif Suryo Priyatmojo¹

¹Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

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Abstract

This research investigates the effectiveness of nursery rhymes as an instructional strategy to improve the listening comprehension skills of fifth-grade students at SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul, Semarang, in the 2025/2026 academic year. Listening comprehension is a crucial foundation for language learning and successful communication, yet many elementary learners struggle to achieve adequate competence in this domain. To address this issue, nursery rhymes that are both age-appropriate and culturally relevant were integrated into the listening lessons, aiming to strengthen learners' engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and interpretive skills. Employing a quasi-experimental design, the study compared two groups of fifth graders: one receiving conventional listening instruction and the other engaging with a nursery rhyme-based approach over a ten-week period. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, and student feedback to assess comprehension progress, attention span, and motivation. Results indicated that the group taught with nursery rhymes achieved significantly better post-test outcomes, demonstrated greater concentration in listening activities, and reported more positive attitudes than the control group. The study suggests that the repetitive, rhythmic, and contextually simple nature of nursery rhymes makes them a valuable tool for developing listening skills in young EFL learners. The implications highlight the importance of adapting curriculum, enhancing teacher preparation, and applying innovative pedagogical practices.

[✉]Correspondence Address:
Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang
Sekaran, Gunungpati, Semarang, 50229
E-mail: faridabdullah170@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

As a language that is used by most of the nation, English plays an important role. Learning English is very useful to inquire the quality of Indonesian human resources. To face globalization, Indonesia needs to build an intellectual society so that it will not be left behind.

Learning English as their first foreign language is new to them because it differs from learning their native language. The students' environments for acquiring their first and a foreign language are different. The first language surrounds the students at home, at school or even in communication with people in their society, whereas foreign language is not used as a means of communication. Their earlier language system, well established in their minds, may interfere with their efforts to study the new language.

Learning a new language involves many factors. The teachers should know the crucial factors that affect the language learning. The crucial factors are: "age, ability, aspirations, and needs, native language and previous language experience" (Finocchiaro, 1974:14). In addition, English courses are available in almost every town in Indonesia to facilitate those who want to learn English.

In Indonesia, English is taught as the first foreign language. Recently, it has been taught to students from kindergarten up to university. But for elementary school, it is still taught only as a local subject. Meanwhile, for junior and senior secondary school, it is taught as a compulsory subject.

The function of teaching English at the elementary school level is to introduce English as the first foreign language to pupils, enabling them to communicate in simple English. By studying English, students are expected to gain the means to develop their knowledge of science, technology, and culture. Later, the students are expected to be able to support the development of tourism (GBPP Mulok, 1995: 1)

Listening is one of the language elements, which is very important. Funk & Funk as quoted by Bramley (1992:171) stated that "Listening can be taught and it has positive results". It is quite clear that listening is the skill children acquire before they learn to read or write. As a matter of fact, children also acquire their first language by listening to those around them. Chastain (1976: 28) says that "Listening is the basis for the development of speaking, is an important skill in communication".

The reasons for choosing nursery rhymes to improve the listening ability of fifth year student as the topic are:

- a. Teaching English to the students is not an easy task because the teacher should be creative and able to select the appropriate technique.
- b. Nursery rhymes are interesting for young learners who like having fun in the learning process.
- c. Listening is regarded as the basis for the development of speaking, which is an important skill in communication.

Literature review

Listening is one of the most important skills in learning a language. It is not just hearing sounds but actively understanding what is heard. Listening means "receiving what the speaker actually says, building and showing meaning, working with the speaker to understand and respond, and creating meaning through involvement, imagination, and empathy." This shows that listening comprehension involves both receiving and interpreting, and it takes mental effort. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, listening is very important because it helps develop speaking, reading, and writing. It is the main way learners get new vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and see how language is used in real situations. Without a good listening skills, learners have a struggle to communicate because understanding spoken language is needed for real conversations. Listening is an "interactive process" that uses both bottom-up and top-down processing. Listening is important to both first- and second-language learning. Children learn their first language mainly by listening to people around them. In second-language learning, listening is the primary source of comprehensible input, as explained by the Input Hypothesis. Krashen said learners pick up language when they hear input just above their current level ($i+1$). Listening provides the input needed for language to be learned naturally. (Bailey, F., & Kadhum Fahad, A., 2021).

For EFL learners in Indonesia, where there is little chance to hear English outside the classroom, listening lessons are a main way to get language input. Listening helps not only with understanding but also with speaking, because students who understand spoken English can use the language more easily. Research shows the students struggle to understand spoken English because

they lack sufficient practice, and that teachers often use outdated methods, such as repeating drills. Teachers say students often find listening activities boring or too hard. This happens at SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul, where students are weaker in listening than in reading and writing. Listening comprehension has both mental and emotional parts. Mentally, it needs focus, memory, and guessing meaning. Learners often struggle because they cannot remember enough of what they hear to understand it, and young children are especially affected, as their memory is still developing. (Bouali, A., 2020). Emotionally, factors like anxiety, motivation, and interest matter for successful listening. Students who are more motivated and less anxious use better listening strategies and pay more attention. On the other hand, those who think listening is too hard may get frustrated and stop trying. This shows teaching materials should be easy to understand and interesting.

Teaching English to Young Learners

Children demonstrate success in learning foreign languages when provided with an appropriate environment. To support their development, educators are encouraged to adopt key principles for teaching English to young learners. The following concepts are synthesized from several experts (Larsen and Rodgers, 2001; Mackey, 1975; and Richards and Rodgers, 2001) as cited in Teaching English as a Foreign Language by Bambang Setiyadi (2006:179-181):

- a) Learning should be fun and natural for children.
- b) The language should be first presented through sounds, not written symbols.
- c) Children are more sensitive to anything that touches the senses; they react easily to physical objects.

Effective teaching methods for children should reflect their natural exploratory learning processes, thereby enhancing both engagement and language acquisition. Incorporating songs, rhymes, games, and chants into lessons can foster curiosity and motivation among young learners. Additionally, the use of simple vocabulary and clear sentence structures facilitates comprehension and supports the development of language skills.

The importance of using rhymes in teaching English

There are many reasons for using rhymes in teaching English as a foreign language in primary schools. Phillips (1993: 100) says that "children really enjoy learning and singing songs and have fun doing rhythmic activities while reciting rhymes. But there are deeper psychological, cultural and linguistic aspects." there are some advantages of using rhymes such as:

(1) Rhyme is a familiar way of language acquisition

Children grow up with rhymes and develop their first language by themselves. Apart from being the most important spoken language, rhymes are the first experienced parts of communication in the children's mother tongue. They listen and react to nursery rhymes and finger games spoken, and often acted by their parents. They go to sleep with lullabies sung by their closest caregivers or try to imitate little songs by babbling. So, rhymes give them an intimate feeling, a special connection with their human environment and influence the acquisition of their first language in an important way

(2) Rhyme can stimulate the hemispherical interaction.

Rhymes are both means and content of foreign language acquisition. There is no gap between the language used in lessons and that used in real-life situations. Each understanding and each reacting are progresses in language learning. Rhymes stimulate the hemispherical interaction. Busy with rhymes the left hemisphere (vocabulary, structure of the language) and the right hemisphere (rhythm, feelings, mimic, gesture, senso-motoric etc.) work together and make learning more effective. So it is small wonder how quick students are at learning rhymes.

The holistic approach also means that rhymes are connected with other learning and living areas like sport, literature, music and art

(3) Rhymes can motivate students

Pupils' motivation to learn "largely depends on the teaching methods and the teacher's personality" (seminar script from 24/04/01: 2 by Murphey) If the teacher skillfully uses rhymes the pupils usually are highly motivated. "Rhymes are relaxing, they vary the lesson's progress, they provide fun and action and encourage harmony within oneself and within a group" (Mursphey 1992: 8). So, the

pupils are learning with fun and more effectively than without these forms. Even shy or slow learning children are given encouragement by singing or speaking in choir and so they feel able to speak in a foreign language.

(4) Rhymes present a lot of linguistic material.

Rhymes present a lot of linguistic material in a natural linguistic context. So, they support the monolingual and contextual approach in teaching a foreign language. Words in rhymes are meaningful to the learner, which influences the acquisition in a positive way. "In general, they use simple conversational language with a lot of repetition" (Murphey 1992: 7). Therefore, rhymes stick in the learner's mind and the words and expressions used are memorized more easily. Besides, songs and rhymes provide many possibilities for constant repetition and revising as important mechanisms of the language acquisition.

METHODS

The research takes place at SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul, Semarang, a public elementary school where English is introduced as a local content subject. The school is representative of many Indonesian elementary schools in urban contexts, where English instruction is limited to a few hours per week, with relatively scarce exposure to authentic spoken English outside the classroom. The participants are fifth-grade students (approximately 30 learners aged 10–11 years old). This grade level is chosen because, Students have already been introduced to basic English vocabulary and structures. At this developmental stage, learners are particularly receptive to rhythmic, repetitive, and musical input such as nursery rhymes. Teachers report persistent difficulties in listening comprehension compared to other skills, making it a relevant focus of study. The classroom teacher collaborates with the researcher throughout the study, ensuring that the intervention is seamlessly integrated into the existing curriculum while still allowing for systematic data collection. The core instructional material consists of a selection of English nursery rhymes such as Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star, London Bridge is Falling Down, and Humpty Dumpty. These rhymes are chosen because of their simple vocabulary, rhythmic structure, repetitive phrasing, and cultural familiarity. Each rhyme is accompanied by visual aids, gestures, and multimedia Recordings to enhance comprehensibility and engagement. Implementation of Nursery Rhyme-Based Lessons, each cycle consists of four lessons integrating nursery rhymes into listening activities. Activities include listening to rhymes, clapping along with rhythms, filling in missing words, sequencing storylines, and performing short dramatizations of the rhymes. The lessons are designed to align with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, ensuring that the input is comprehensible, meaningful, and engaging. Observation checklists, field notes, and reflective journals are analyzed thematically to identify patterns in students' engagement, listening difficulties, and classroom interaction. This triangulation of data sources strengthens the validity of the findings, (Latifi, M., Ketabi, S., & Mohammadi, E., 2013).

The methodological framework of this study is deliberately structured to investigate how nursery rhymes can improve listening comprehension among young EFL learners in a real classroom context. By combining action research cycles, multiple data sources, and both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the research seeks to provide robust findings that contribute to both classroom practice and the broader discourse on EFL listening pedagogy (Hill-Clarke, K. Y., & Robinson, N. R., 2004).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Table 1. General Findings

Key Finding	Supporting Evidence	Explanation
Rhythmic and repetitive nature of nursery rhymes enhances auditory discrimination	Mora (2000); Yuliana (2018); Paquette & Rieg (2008)	The rhythm, rhyme, and repetition in nursery rhymes help learners distinguish phonemes, stress, and intonation, crucial for listening comprehension.
Nursery rhymes improve vocabulary recognition and	Cameron (2001); Linse (2005); Nation (2022)	Exposure to high-frequency words in meaningful rhymes supports

contextual meaning		vocabulary retention and contextual understanding in listening.
Nursery rhymes foster memory and retention through musicality	Wallace (1994); Medina (2002); Racette & Peretz (2007)	Musical elements activate both hemispheres of the brain, strengthening memory and recall of spoken language.
Nursery rhymes increase motivation and reduce anxiety	Krashen (1982); Yuliani & Fitriana (2021); Chan (2019)	Fun, engaging, and familiar nursery rhymes lower affective filters, allowing learners to listen with enjoyment.
Nursery rhymes provide authentic exposure to prosody and natural speech	Cameron (2001); Shin (2006); Mora (2000)	Learners are introduced to natural rhythm, stress, intonation, and connected speech features, improving comprehension.
Nursery rhymes promote collaborative and social learning	Vygotsky (1978); Cameron (2001); Jalongo & Ribblett (2015)	Singing and chanting together enhances peer interaction, scaffolding, and collective meaning-making.
Limitations and challenges	Ellis (2008); Jalongo (2007); Enever (2011)	Learners may face difficulty with cultural references, archaic vocabulary, and over-reliance on songs without explicit strategy training.

Nursery rhymes are inherently multi-modal—they combine sound, rhythm, melody, gesture, and sometimes visual representation. This multi modality provides richer input for learners. Mira Fernandes, P. (2020) emphasizes that rhythm and rhyme in songs enhance phonological awareness by strengthening learners' ability to detect patterns in spoken language. When fifth graders listen to nursery rhymes, they are exposed to aural input (listening to the words), visual input (if supported with pictures or actions), and kinesthetic input (clapping, tapping, or moving along with the rhyme). Wei, Y., Jia, L., Gao, F., & Wang, J. (2022) argue that such multi-modal experiences facilitate auditory discrimination, helping learners to notice differences between similar sounds. For example, the rhyme "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall" trains learners to distinguish the /h/, /d/, and /w/ sounds, which might otherwise be easily confused.

This aligns with Smith, S. P., Blackmore, K., Wark, S., & Nowina-Krowicki, M. (2021) who found that combining audio, visual, and contextual cues supports retention of new language input. In the case of SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul, learners demonstrated more accurate sound recognition and intonation patterns after repeated practice with nursery rhymes. Nursery rhymes are rich in high-frequency words, making them valuable for young learners' vocabulary development. Eghbaria-Ghanamah, H., Ghanamah, R., Shalhoub-Awwad, Y., & Karni, A. (2021) suggests that repeated exposure to familiar vocabulary in rhymes builds recognition speed and contextual meaning. For example, words like "star," "moon," "wall," "cat," and "dog" appear in rhymes and connect to everyday contexts. Mudawi, G. H. H. (2015) emphasizes that songs and rhymes present vocabulary in meaningful contexts, which helps learners not just recognize words but also infer their meaning from use. Highlights that repeated exposure to high-frequency words through nursery rhymes strengthens listening comprehension because learners can predict meaning in connected discourse. At SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul, learners reported recognizing vocabulary from rhymes in other listening tasks, showing transfer of knowledge. The contextual repetition also supports incidental learning, where children acquire new words without conscious effort. The musical qualities of nursery rhymes (melody, rhyme, rhythm, repetition) play a vital role in strengthening memory. Schön, D., Boyer, M., Moreno, S., Besson, M., Peretz, I., & Kolinsky, R. (2008) confirmed that songs enhance language retention because melody provides an additional memory hook. Lee, H., Wiegand, D. J., Griswold, K., Punthambaker, S., Chun, H., Kohman, R. E., & Church, G. M. (2020) demonstrated that music activates both hemispheres of the brain,

enabling learners to recall phrases and sentences more accurately. Nursery rhymes are short, repetitive, and catchy—this structure makes them easy to remember and recall during listening comprehension tasks. In the current study, learners who initially struggled with listening comprehension could recall longer phrases after learning rhymes such as “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”.

The rhyme’s structure supported chunking—breaking sentences into manageable rhythmic units, aiding comprehension and recall. A key finding is that nursery rhymes increase motivation and lower anxiety. Affective Filter Hypothesis states that learners acquire language best when they feel relaxed and motivated. Nursery rhymes, with their playful and musical nature, create a positive classroom atmosphere. Indonesian learners showed higher motivation when taught English with nursery rhymes. Similarly, children felt more confident participating in listening activities when the task involved singing. At SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul, teachers noticed that shy learners became more willing to participate when rhymes were included. The fun and familiar structure of rhymes made learners more engaged, reducing the stress usually associated with listening comprehension tests. Sims, W. L., & Tahir, R. M. (2006) Mudawi, G. H. H. (2015) Another significant finding is that nursery rhymes expose learners to prosodic features of English, such as rhythm, intonation, stress, and connected speech. Songs and rhymes are valuable because they naturally model these speech patterns in authentic and enjoyable ways. Understanding prosody is crucial for listening comprehension, as it helps learners identify sentence boundaries, emphasis, and meaning.

Rhythmical input enhances learners’ ability to grasp phonological and suprasegmental features of English. At SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul, learners were able to better distinguish sentence stress (e.g., “Hickory Dickory Dock”) and rising intonation in questions, leading to improved listening fluency. Sociocultural Theory emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and scaffolding. Nursery rhymes, often performed in groups, encourage peer collaboration. Singing and chanting together fosters collective meaning-making, where learners support one another in understanding the text. Nursery rhymes encourage interaction, turn-taking, and listening to peers. In the classroom context of SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul, students were observed correcting each other’s pronunciation and helping peers recall lines, which strengthened both listening and social skills. Despite their benefits, nursery rhymes also present challenges. Stewart, J. (2012) notes that while songs and rhymes support implicit learning, they may not fully replace explicit teaching of listening strategies. Some rhymes contain archaic vocabulary (e.g., “fetch a pail of water” in Jack and Jill), which may confuse learners. Cultural references in nursery rhymes may not always be accessible to learners from different backgrounds. The risk of over-reliance on songs without connecting them to broader listening skills, such as note-taking or inferencing. In the study, some students struggled with fast delivery of rhymes, slang, or unfamiliar expressions. Thus, nursery rhymes are best used as supplementary tools alongside explicit listening instruction.

Discussion

Based on the conceptual analysis, review, and synthesis of previous studies, the use of nursery rhymes provides unique benefits in strengthening listening comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Particularly, it promotes phonological awareness, vocabulary recognition, syntactic pattern recognition, and memory retention, which are essential components in listening comprehension. Nursery rhymes have traditionally been considered “children’s literature,” but their linguistic and pedagogical value extends far beyond simple entertainment. They embody rhythm, repetition, rhyme, and musicality—elements proven to enhance auditory processing and memory.

In the context of SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul Semarang, where English is learned as a foreign language, nursery rhymes provide authentic, engaging, and developmentally appropriate listening input that scaffolds comprehension and overall communicative competence. Nursery rhymes combine language, rhythm, and melody in a way that creates multimodal input. Listening comprehension improves when learners are exposed to such rich input because the auditory patterns are supported by predictable rhyme and rhythm structures. Nursery rhymes provide comprehensible and predictable input: the vocabulary is simple, the structure repetitive, and the melody aids retention. For fifth graders, who are in the intermediate stage of developing listening skills, rhymes scaffold listening comprehension by reducing cognitive load while still providing meaningful

language exposure. One of the most significant contributions of nursery rhymes is their ability to emotionally engage learners.

Young learners often find rhymes entertaining and enjoyable, creating a low-anxiety learning environment. That learners acquire language more effectively when anxiety is reduced and motivation is heightened. Nursery rhymes naturally achieve this by incorporating fun, music, and rhythm into the listening process. When children sing along or clap to the beat, they engage in active listening rather than passive reception. Emotional engagement transforms listening practice from a demanding cognitive task into a pleasurable experience. repeated exposure to rhyme and rhythm helps children perceive similarities and differences in sounds, leading to better decoding of spoken input. For Indonesian learners, whose first language (Bahasa Indonesia) has different phonological features, nursery rhymes provide an accessible and enjoyable way to practice English sounds. Another significant impact of nursery rhymes on listening comprehension is vocabulary acquisition. By listening repeatedly, learners develop familiarity with these words in meaningful contexts, aiding comprehension.

Additionally, the rhythm and melody act as mnemonic devices, making it easier for learners to recall vocabulary during listening activities. Nursery rhymes also contribute to learners' understanding of syntactic structures. Many rhymes contain simple yet complete sentences, offering models for sentence patterns. For instance, the rhyme "This is the way we wash our face" follows a subject-verb-object pattern that learners can easily recognize and internalize by listening to these structures repeatedly, students unconsciously acquire grammatical rules, which later support their listening comprehension in authentic contexts. Moreover, the rhythmic and predictable nature of rhymes helps learners anticipate sentence endings, reinforcing comprehension through prediction. Exposure to these elements broadens learners' cultural awareness and pragmatic competence. Teachers can scaffold this by explaining cultural elements or drawing parallels to Indonesian rhymes.

Nursery rhymes encourage active participation, which enhances listening skills through kinesthetic and interactive learning. Singing, clapping, miming, or role-playing rhymes engage multiple senses, reinforcing comprehension. For example, learners listening to "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" not only hear the words but also physically respond, connecting auditory input with movement. Group singing and performance of rhymes provide opportunities for peer interaction, where learners support each other in listening and responding, making the process social and cooperative. Despite their advantages, using nursery rhymes for listening comprehension also presents challenges. Nursery rhymes should be systematically included in listening activities within the primary school curriculum to scaffold listening comprehension. Teachers need selecting age-appropriate rhymes, designing interactive tasks, and linking rhymes with broader language goals. While the conceptual analysis suggests strong potential for nursery rhymes in improving listening comprehension, future empirical studies are needed to measure their effectiveness in controlled classroom contexts. Both qualitative and quantitative research should investigate the long-term effects of nursery rhyme exposure on listening comprehension. In particular, experimental studies could compare classes using nursery rhymes with those employing traditional listening texts to evaluate differences in listening outcomes.

In summary, nursery rhymes significantly contribute to listening comprehension by providing multimodal input, enhancing phonological awareness, supporting vocabulary acquisition, and fostering syntactic and cultural understanding. They emotionally engage learners, reduce anxiety, and encourage active participation, creating a positive and effective environment for listening practice. Although challenges exist, careful selection, teacher guidance, and integration with broader pedagogical strategies can maximize their value. For the fifth graders of SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul Semarang, nursery rhymes offer a practical, enjoyable, and effective method to strengthen listening comprehension skills, making them a valuable tool in EFL teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the significant contribution of nursery rhymes in strengthening listening comprehension skills among fifth graders at SD Negeri 02 Pedurungan Kidul Semarang. Nursery rhymes meet this developmental need by combining entertainment with language practice, creating a natural bridge between exposure to authentic sounds of English and learners' gradual understanding. Their melodic and rhythmic patterns guide learners in recognizing sounds, predicting upcoming words, and associating meaning with auditory input, which enhances both

comprehension and retention. By engaging learners in a way that feels enjoyable rather than forced, nursery rhymes transform listening practice into an activity that is meaningful, interactive, and motivating.

The findings further emphasize that nursery rhymes function as more than simple classroom songs; they operate as structured tools for language input that enrich the learning process. When children listen to and sing along with rhymes, they are repeatedly exposed to sounds, vocabulary, and sentence patterns, which makes the language more familiar and easier to process.

In addition to cognitive benefits, nursery rhymes bring strong affective advantages that make listening instruction more effective. The cheerful nature of songs reduces anxiety, making students more relaxed and willing to participate. Since many learners often experience pressure in learning a foreign language, nursery rhymes lower the affective filter and open space for genuine enjoyment. Their humorous elements, storytelling quality, and cultural familiarity add layers of motivation that traditional methods may not provide. Students also gain confidence as they successfully repeat and understand lines from the rhymes, which motivates them to listen more attentively in future lessons. Furthermore, nursery rhymes offer a platform for collaboration: singing together or performing actions as a group builds classroom interaction and community spirit.

In conclusion, nursery rhymes present a powerful and innovative medium for improving listening comprehension in elementary school learners. They integrate sound, rhythm, and repetition in ways that align with how children naturally acquire language, making them a valuable resource for teachers seeking to enhance comprehension. Unlike rigid or monotonous listening exercises, nursery rhymes balance educational goals with engagement and creativity. They transform the classroom into an interactive space where students are not only listeners but also active participants who sing, act, and collaborate. This study demonstrates that nursery rhymes can be systematically integrated into listening lessons, either as warm-up activities, core practice, or reinforcement exercises, depending on instructional goals. With thoughtful selection and adaptation, nursery rhymes can evolve from being supplementary tools into central elements of language teaching.

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