Three Men in a Boat: Jack, Guy and King Cole Teaching Language and Culture through Nursery Rhymes and Famous Proper Names

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Storytelling: Repositioning Literary Texts in Language Teaching

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1. Introduction

It all started a few months after my elder son's birth. An English friend of ours, both my husband's best man and teacher of English, a theatre man and an enthusiast of the creative spirit of his language, presented us with a beautifully illustrated book of Nursery Rhymes and started engrossing on the therapeutic quality of such musical compositions for the night sleep of an already hyperactive boy. Actually, the restless baby was not particularly calmed by endlessly whispering *Twinkle, twinkle, little star* or *Rock-a-by-baby* in the dead of night, but was definitely exhilarated by being carried on his mother's or father's shoulders at the rhythm of *The Grand Old Duke of York*. Only some years later, when he had been joined by a sister and we managed to spend a mythical summer at an English family's, we found lots of very precious audiovisual versions of our beloved Nursery Rhymes among the children's playthings, at a time when the internet was not so world wide spread yet and you could not find there everything you needed as it is nowadays.

Since then, the English Nursery Rhymes have become a kind of shared patrimony and part of the small talk of my family. If my children have an interest in the English language, I would not say in the formal schooling but more in the expressive and creative side of its acquisition, it is certainly due to the periodical exposition to listening to and watching our *Grand Old Duke of York* and *Wow* DVDs.

Also, once we learnt many of the most famous rhymes by heart, it became natural to spot their traces in so many other different contexts such as high literature, pop and rock music, advertising, TV series and soccer chants, disguised under all forms of intertextuality, from direct quotations to rewriting. This has indeed become a kind of family sport in these years: just a couple of months ago the by now 21-year-old student of Physics recommended his Mum a Youtube video, featuring an incredible one man band musician called Dub Fx and a very urban Flower Fairy, who, in the exotic scenario of the Indian coast near Goa and in the frame of an electronic Indie rock love

song (*Wandering Love*), sing a refrain about a mouse and a clock. Well, no wonder, since *Hickory Dickory Dock* proved first of the top ten nursery rhymes in *The Guardian* survey of 2009.

Now, what does my personal story or the story of my family have to do with "repositioning literary texts in language teaching"? Or even more drastically, are Nursery Rhymes to be considered literature at all? And, even granted that they are very useful in the process of learning the language by pre-school children in English speaking contexts, how can they have an impact in ESL teaching/learning environments?

2. Nursery Rhymes as Literature

More than 800 very diverse compositions, including verses suited to every practical purpose as well as songs to incense children's imagination (baby games to play with the child's body parts, dandling rhymes and knee rides; rhymes to chant in every occasion at home or in the open air; alphabet and number rhymes, riddles, tongue twisters, rhymed proverbs and rhymes of advice, counting-out rhymes, lullabies, and so on) were collected by Iona and Peter Opie in *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, first published in 1951 and then reedited in 1997. The earlier printed collections, on which the Opies based their work, dated back to 18th century books like *Tommy Thumb's Song Book* (London, Cooper, 1744) and *Mother Goose Melody* (London, Newberry, *c*. 1765) or *Reliques of English Poetry* (London, Dodsley, 1765).

However, while few of the rhymes may be rooted in the Middle Ages, most of them date back to the 16th and 17th centuries. The Opies also conducted primary fieldwork by interviewing thousands of children and directly recording rhymes and games as they were currently being played. Theirs was the approach of folklorists to *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* of their times, as the title to their second famous book on children's literature goes (1959). They aimed at conducting scholarly research on oral tradition and its early publication history, as well as at exploring the vast range of extant variants and indicating possible interpretations or meanings to the rhymes, which might have a more solid foundation than some of the farfetched "histories" inevitably triggered off by the nonsensical, mysterious and at times seemingly cryptic texts.[1]

Beyond the huge consumption of this literary genre multiplied by Youtube all

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[1] See in particular the collections edited by Halliwell-Phillips (1842; 1849), whose inaccuracies and anachronisms have been criticized among others by Goldthwaite (1996).

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around the world, and despite relatively little academic work, the consolidated corpus provided by the Opies' groundbreaking work has subsequently been made the object of different approaches, which have revealed its characteristics of being both folklore literature and children's literature.[2] The two things do not completely coincide, since what started to be addressed exclusively to children from the 19th century onwards might have originally been addressed to adults, given quite explicit sexual undertones, and to the general public as a channel of information like the news ballads in the early Renaissance period or even as political satire.

Actually, even if the typically 19th century trend to trace the origin of every nursery rhyme to historical figures and events must be moderated and has indeed been amended of its inaccuracies in the 20th century,[3] it is remarkable how the "folklore of folklore" inspires myriads of contemporary virtual and printed reports on single Nursery Rhymes perpetuating legends about the origins and the "real" meanings of verses which in the end are much more easily understood as sound games and word puns to amuse children. The result is the spinning of an endlessly generative storytelling web.[4]

Once Nursery Rhymes have been mainly considered as children's literature, though, authors have approached them on the one hand as actual literature, analyzing their linguistic and poetical features, and on the other hand as expressions of psychosexual, cognitive and linguistic maturation, and, most recently, as agents of empowerment for children and vehicles of cultural conservation.[5] The combination of cognitive, linguistic and cultural imports embodied by these traditional texts obviously results into a widespread didactic impact, given the inveterate habit on the side of English speaking parents to find them useful since the cradle and of teachers to use them in the preprimary schooling stages. So much so that the educational value and benefits of learning Nursery Rhymes at a very early age are not only a shared popular conviction but have also received a certain amount of medical attention and given scientific evidence.

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[2] For a general outline of these approaches see Delamar (1987) and Vocca (2003).

[3] Folklorist Philip Hiscock (2008) defines this tendency "modern *euhemerism*" arguing against the idea of Nursery Rhymes as "coded" messages through the cases of *Humpty Dumpty* and *Ring a ring a rosie/Ring around the Rosie*. In the same article he provides an essential bibliography to the ethnographic study of this genre as folklore.

[4] A recent example of the UK and US editorial markets' interest for the "hidden meanings" is the many editions (Granta, Penguin, Gotham) of Roberts (2004), which nevertheless I have found a very reasonable and effective aid for Nursery Rhymes teaching to older students.

[5] An attempt at linguistic analysis is to be found in Schellenberger (1996). A chapter on folklore/oral literature as part of children's literature can be found in a very concise and updated manual by Russell (2014).

3. Nursery Rhymes and Learning

First of all, research in the consolidated line of music and education has showed how language learning based on sung sequences enhances learning with longer-lasting effects in memory compared to speech sequences (Schön *et al.*, 2008). Knowing and singing rhymes in particular facilitate the development of children's cognitive ability to "memorize, sequence, and hear, speak, move to, and feel patterns" (Kenney, 2005); rhymes are said to "boost brain development, increase vocabulary, and promote future academic success" (Cooper, 2010). Indeed, it has long been proved that phonological awareness is an early predictor to success in reading and spelling (Bryant *et al.*, 1989; Adams, 1990), particularly when the learning process is linked to enjoyable experiences and psychomotor involvement (Diamant-Cohen, 2004).

Nursery Rhymes, presented with visual inputs, learnt by heart, sung, acted and danced individually or better in group seem to meet the cognitive and learning requirements of Gardner's multiple intelligences and learning styles to perfection, and even more the case of specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia. Finally, it has also been pointed out that they preserve a culture that spans generations, providing something in common among parents, grandparents and kids, which comes very handy in an expanded Community Language Learning (Halfon *et al.*, 2001). In the specific case of English Nursery Rhymes, they also span geographical hemispheres, being a shared patrimony of all the English speaking cultures around the world in very much the same versions.

If brain scientists, musicologists, teaching theorists, educators, parents' organizations and general means of information all agree that Nursery Rhymes have a beneficial effect on all four areas of child development (namely the cognitive, physical, language and social/emotional developmental domains), can they have any useful application to second language learning? The anticipation of ESL learning age to kindergarten and preprimary school does actually allow the use of such material at a similar age as native speakers' and avoid the problem of presenting older students with too childish texts. However, their cultural specificity and also the inevitable gap in competence level between native and non-native speakers of even the same age seem to be very hard to overcome.

Nursery Rhymes present all the problems implied by authentic, old, at times lexically and grammatically complex literary texts. Yet, mass media globalization, which is always a step ahead of us, seems to have already solved part of our problems and doubts: I am told that the present generation of 3 to 5 year-old Italians have been

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made familiar to English Nursery Rhymes by the vision of the most beloved *Peppa Pig* (although ridiculously translated)! And is it really true that one must completely give up the use of such texts with older students, who are surely more linguistically proficient and thus readier to develop an interest in their diachronic as well as synchronic comprehension? Despite the fact that almost any Google result for "ESL teaching", especially when combined with "young learners", defines Nursery Rhymes, together with songs and stories, as efficient ways to develop home literacy, phonemic awareness, grammar and vocabulary in a joyful environment, their use can hardly find any scientific justification and foundation (Flege *et al.*, 1995; Halfon *et al.*, 2001; Costenaro, 2013).

4. Nursery Rhymes and Teaching

The turn of this second literature on the internet is normally applicative, and yet the suggested teaching/learning activities are quite scanty and not particularly appealing. On a theoretical plane, one is left with the generic assumption that all the advantages which recommend Nursery Rhymes for the cognitive, linguistic and social development of native speakers can be extended to L2 learners. Surely, greater support would come from adopting in L2 teaching the humanistic approach and the linked cluster of methodologies—*Total Physical Response*, *Neuro-Linguistic Programming*, *Storytelling* and *Gamification*, with their emphasis on informal, game-based and cooperative learning aimed at enhancing creativeness in the language, all of them would very evidently concur to justify the didactic use of Nursery Rhymes as adequate and consistent language material. Inseparable from music and action, they are fun, they tell old stories and are prone to generate new ones.

In my twenty-years' practice as a teachers' trainer I have always proposed English Nursery Rhymes and American Jazz Chants as inputs for secondary school trainees to build their teaching action and their learning units upon, while adopting the communicative approach to teaching "English civilization", a compulsory subject in the Italian national curriculum, which I have reinterpreted as teaching language through culture and culture through language (culture in the anthropological sense: Graziano, 2003). Since the Seventies, the national curricula in Italy have simultaneously allotted the L2 the role of contributing to the development of more generally cognitive and expressive competencies and emphasized a pragmatical and historical image of language in general as the connective tissue to the community of its speakers. Somehow they try to bridge the theoretical opposition between

Saussurean/Wittgensteinian linguistics and post-Chomskyan cognitive (psycho) linguistics by reconciling them on the inevitably synchretic level of educational objectives and teaching practices in the modern multicultural school contexts.

So, for teachers of English, like for teachers of any of the so called diaspora languages, the awareness of having to deal with and having to choose—mainly due to shortness of time—between culture-bound and culture-free selections of language becomes crucial. Even more so given the intrinsic multidimensionality of English—at the same time five standards, three standardizing areas, at least 31 families of pidgins and creoles in addition to the traditional dialects of UK and US, plus the ever growing dimension as global lingua franca, according to Tom McArthur's Circle of World English. With their appeal on the most remote archetypal dimension of child's psychology and psychological development, their worldwide diffusion and their already mentioned evergreen creative power, Nursery Rhymes seem an ideal selection of textuality to overcome the almost aporetic dilemma impending on contemporary teachers of English as an L2: which English for our schools nowadays?

4.1 Using Nursery Rhymes with Pre-service teachers

I intend to devote a more detailed report to my experience with pre-service teachers, to whom I used to recommend Nursery Rhymes from pre-primary to upper secondary school, in future: I also hope that, beyond their very enthusiastic and very elaborate responses in the shape of experimental teaching products during their training, I will be able to collect their real students' response at some years' distance from their qualification exams to verify the actual impact of these texts when turned into teaching materials in the L2 class. What I would like to present here is my own latest experimentation with Nursery Rhymes and the teaching of language and culture as a sort of case study, whose interest and, I hope, novelty consist in four deeply interconnected elements of the learning environment: (1) the addressee; (2) the ensuing contents and (3) choice of pedagogical approach; (4) the use of ICT. Also, I dare say that it is probably quite an unusual experiment in the panorama of the Italian academy.

The addressees of this teaching *scherzo* were in fact University students of the B.A. courses of Foreign Languages in their ninth semester: thus, the highest degree of education and the oldest students to have been administered Nursery Rhymes, "adults" by far for European lifelong learning programs. The third year course in English Language and Translation used to include a survey of the history and of the

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contemporary regional variation of English.

The general didactic aim was to raise diachronic and diatopic awareness of the English language: the full comprehension of how deeply vocabulary and even grammar are rooted in the historical and cultural dimensions of a language and, through the study of its regional varieties, the enhancement by contrast of the standard phonetic/phonological competence. The idea of coupling some of the most famous Nursery Rhymes of the English tradition with popular proper names (Jack, King Cole and Guy) arose from a particularly brilliant group of students with such an academic background and an advanced level of linguistic competence. After dealing with the Old English and Middle English phases, one of the students expressed her curiosity about the origin and the use of the name *Jack* as in The Union Jack.

A series of hypotheses and subsequent research both in diachronic and synchronic direction, on internet and paper dictionaries, almost automatically followed on the side of some of the students, who discovered both the antiquity of the name *Jack* and the incredibly wide semantic range of the noun *jack*. I provided my little Nursery Rhymes' mania (Jack is repeatedly present among the characters of their stories) including original versions and modern rewritings, and finally, under my supervision and with the help of our Moodle platform administrators, the more versed students in ICT realized the UniTusMoodle version of a learning object on "Jack" addressed to their colleagues.

Famous first names and nursery rhymes

🍃 Rationale

JACK

🍃 Origin of the word "Jack"
📘 Glossary
🍃 Jack be nimble, Jack be quick (Nursery Rhyme)
❓ More Nursery Rhymes
🍃 Idioms with Jack
❓ More and more Jacks....
❓ How to create a Jack o' Lantern
📄 Jack O' Lantern
❓ A very simple final test

Figure 1. Jack on the Moodle platform

The first step consists in accounting for the etymological researches about the Germanic and French origins of the name Jack and the semantic extensions it has acquired being such a popular first name. In order to start exploring the innumerable uses of the word, the second activity exploits the Moodle tool Glossary to create a three pages combination of visual inputs with the main definitions of *jack* as a simple morpheme, or in compounded nouns (ex: *jack-boots* or *yellow jack*) or in idiomatic/slang expressions (ex: with the meaning of "a five pound note" or even as a verb phrase *to get jacked*, meaning "to be punched, stolen or stabbed").

Three of the most famous Nursery Rhymes starring a Jack follow, presented in the form of youtube videos accompanied by lyrics. *Jack be nimble, Jack be quick* is immediately contrasted with the still popular *Limbo Rock*, containing a very evident parody of the Nursery Rhyme. *Little Jack Horner*'s and *Jack and Jill*'s texts have been used for quizzes and transcribed as gapped texts (in one case as a short-answer, in the other as a multiple-choice quiz). Particular attention was paid to the choice of videos in order to convey the idea of Nursery Rhymes' everlasting charm to English speaking kids of different age and nationality: in the first case, the video is a kind of animated cartoon intended for very young children; in the second, it is an episode from *WOW*, a sort of musical where real preadolescents sing and dance a hip-hop version of *Jack and Jill* with a US drawn scenario in the background.

The latter Nursery Rhyme triggered off research on very traditional, at times

old-fashioned idioms or proverbs, like "*every Jack has his Jill*", "*Jack of all trades and master of none*", or "*to be a bit of a Jack the Lad*"; whereas *Little Jack Horner* opened up to a long list of proper names and surnames or nicknames, sometimes belonging to historical figures (from Jack London to Jack Nicholson, from Jack the Ripper to Jacko) sometimes to fictive characters (from Jack Sparrow to Jack Frost), sometimes indicating animal breeds (Jack Russell or Jackrabbit), brands (from Jack Daniel's to Lumberjack) or folklore objects (Jack o'Lantern). Students attending my class enjoyed so much being engaged in a kind of guessing game which mixed randomly some of the *Jacks* already known to Italians with those they did not know and with other uses of the noun *jack* that they decided to turn it into a multiple choice quiz with pictures and quite ironical alternatives to be uploaded on the platform.

Figure 2. Various "Jacks" discovered through research

The result is not only the acquisition of new cultural and linguistic notions through collaborative research and individual reuse, but also, and maybe more importantly, the development of the metacognitive awareness of how a multiple choice test works—which can be useful in any working career. Having spent some time during my course on the Germanic root and cognates of the word "Halloween", the students involved in the creation of this learning object decided to devote a final powerpoint presentation to the legend of the Jack-o'-Lantern and its Irish-American connection, including instructions on how to make one. Finally, since it is good practice to assess the learning outcome of every teaching lesson in a more formal way, a very simple, semiserious, final test was also prepared to test their knowledge of the topic;

however, as I said, a lot more has been learnt in the process.

Approach and procedure applied to the "King Cole" unit are very similar, although the tools used on Moodle, some of the activities and the order of the materials' presentation are different. All in all, the students' performance in terms of personal engagement in learning English is somehow even more surprising than with the "Jack" unit.

Figure 3. King Cole on the Moodle platform

This time the focus is mainly on the Nursery Rhyme about the semi-historical, semi-legendary figure of a pre-Arthurian king and on its generative power in modern times. Yet, as an introductory and motivational step, a matching activity (gapped text with multiple choice to be matched with images) has been devised to familiarize with the occasions when *King Cole* is used as a nickname or even as a proper name for a tea blend and a botanical species in modern times. One of the frames includes a short text on the original Old King Cole and serves as an introduction to the presentation of the actual Nursery Rhyme through a very classical subtitled video version with children dressed up in costume, playing and singing to it.

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Choose the correct options in the descriptions and then match each description with the corresponding image:

Description	Image
1) Nathaniel Adams Coles (March 17, 1919 - February 15, 1965), known professionally as Nat King Cole, was an [▾], who became a very famous [▾]. His [▾] is still enjoyed today especially because his daughter Natalie has re-released it. In 1942, Nat King Cole was one of the first [▾] to sign with Capitol. Cole produced over 150 [▾] on the Pop, R&B and Country charts, a staggering record that remains unbroken by any other [▾] ever signed to the label. At the time of his death in 1965, it was reported that Capitol had sold over nine million Nat King Cole [▾]. Cole's catalog continues to sell about one million [▾] per year around the world.	*Cole—Chicago Nat.* Description: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
2) Colbert Michael Hamels (born December 27, 1983 in San Diego, California), known as King Cole, is a [▾] pitcher who plays for the [...]es of Major League Baseball. right-handed powerful left-handed	Description: [▾]

Figure 4. Example of a matching activity using words and images

The attention of university students of English as a foreign language is drawn on the strange objects surrounding the king (anachronistic pipes and bowls must be intended as musical instruments), but mainly on the key-word *merry*, which is normally paired only with Christmas or with the title of Shakespeare's renowned comedy. The study of key-words in their linguistic collocations and historical contexts, along the lines drawn by Raymond Williams' groundbreaking books, has revealed in my experience one of the most fruitful approaches to language and culture teaching. *Merry*

happens to be a very remarkably culture-bound word, impinging on the question of the very hard to define English—vs. British—identity.

When used in the phrase *Merry Old England*, it is charged with nostalgic echoes and connotations referring to an idealized medieval society and an idyllic countryside, populated by comrades in arms and drinking buddies (Robin Hood's *Merry Men*) and women given to laughter, fun and easy life (all very transgressive behavior according to Puritan values). Students even found *merry widow* as indicating a special kind of bra produced in the occasion of the homonymous 1952 film starring Lana Turner! The presentation of these research outcomes concludes with a challenge: "So, can you work out the general meaning of the word *merry*?" given as an assignment.

Then, after including a reference text on the "history" of the Welsh King Cole and his race, a few of the most popular rewritings of this Nursery Rhyme are proposed as texts accompanied by learning activities: the video of one of the many versions of pantomimes inspired by King Cole (this is recommended to our scopes by its insistence on the subject of being *merry*) is proposed as a listening activity; the famous song *Musical Box* from the Genesis album *Nursery Cryme* is presented through audio-video, lyrics, an Italian translation produced by the students themselves, which assigns the quotation of the Nursery Rhyme refrain as a prompt to further translation; a prose version of the possible story of Old King Cole reinterpreted by L. Frank Baum, the American author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, with text and recorded audio, is given as a stimulus to pure storytelling reading/listening. Many more revisions of *Old King Cole*'s story, such as Disney's 1933 Silly Symphony and the U.S. Army Airborne Rangers Cadence, are left unmentioned and saved for prospective learners' curiosity and future research.

Likewise, the third Learning Unit on "Guy" was not developed, but left as a follow-up activity. At the moment, it just contains the indication of three inputs to reflect upon and to be included in the final product, not necessarily in the order given. The first is a digital revision of the Nursery Rhyme connected to Guy, i.e. a short audio reproducing the prologue to the popular film *V for Vendetta*, where the female protagonist recites the opening lines of *Remember, Remember the Fifth of November*; the second is the proverb "*Don't build bonfires in your backyard if you don't want to burn your house*", and the third is the utterance "*Hi, guys!*" The scope of this semi-empty space on the platform is to challenge more students of English to carry out their own research on linguistic and cultural contents, create their own learning materials and activities and exploit the resources and the tools of online platforms even

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further than we, digital immigrants, can do and have done.

5. Conclusion

If I should describe the process and the outcome of this experience in a very synthetic way, I would say that adult learners with a background in the history of the English language have improved both their linguistic and communicative competencies in the use of modern English lexicon (vocabulary and phrases) by creating their own knowledge clips + learning activities with a cooperative approach facilitated by the use of ICT tools. It seems to me that most of the eight key competencies for lifelong learning recommended by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe in 2006 have been satisfied, particularly the fifth: "learning to learn", which in this experiment has developed into "learning to learn by teaching".[6]

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[6] *Learning to learn by teaching* (L2LbyTe) is the title of a Grundtvig LLP Project coordinated by Viterbo University in the years 2012-14, centred on the idea of interchanging roles between "learners" and "teachers". The large European partnership consisting of 9 members, among which universities, schools, NGOs from Belgium, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, UK, have been exploring how adults can learn while creating knowledge clips for their peers thus becoming their (own) teachers.

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