TESL

Teaching English as a Second Language

Vol. 7, No. 2 Laie, Hawaii Winter 1974

MOTHER GOOSE AND ESL

by Ted Plaister

What can an ESL teacher do with a class of twenty sophisticated young adults who know a considerable amount of English, yet who are still weak in auding[1]; who need practice in making decisions from information which they hear (rather than see); and who are somewhat hesitant when it comes to speaking? My suggestion is to teach them Mother Goose Rhymes. Before you stop reading in disgust, which is what I would have done a few years ago, consider what can be accomplished with these simple rhymes.

To explicate this, let me detail for you an account of the procedures which I followed in using Mother Goose Rhymes with a class of twenty Japanese university graduates, average age about 28 years, some of whom were being groomed for very important positions with some of the largest companies in Japan.[2] While I have no empirical data to show evidence of effectiveness of this technique, on the basis of teacher judgment and student reaction, I nonetheless feel that significant improvement occurred in their ability to understand English spoken at normal speed.

Before teaching by means of Mother Goose Rhymes, the students must accept that "childish" materials are being used only as a means to an end. I had anticipated a problem, but in actual practice, there was none. These students were highly motivated to learn and to them, "the end justified the means". The students understood clearly that I was using the rhymes in order to help them improve their understanding of spoken English.

The actual procedure I followed stems, in part, from a technique suggested by Harnadek for use in critical reading.[3] What

CONTENTS

I have done is adapt it for teaching auding to non-native speakers of English. The first step in the teaching procedure is dictation. The rhyme is dictated line by line at *normal conversational speed.* If it is NOT done then the overall effectiveness of the procedure is seriously diluted. After all, the intent is to improve auding. At no time during the dictation does the teacher give a word in isolation. The lines of the rhyme are repeated over and over in their entirety. One very effective device is, before the dictation, to tell the students the number of words in a given line. In this way they can check the number of words they have written down with the actual number of words as given

Dr. Ted Plaister, director of the English Language Institute at the University of Hawaii, has taught ESL for twenty years, including classes in Thailand, Japan, Micronesia, and American Samoa.

For the past three years he has also been affiliated with the East-West Center as Teacher Trainer in the ESOL Administrator's program.

Dr. Plaister has formerly contributed to the *TESL Reporter.*

them by the teacher. For example, let us take a line from *Little Miss Muffet.* The teacher says, "This line has five words in it." The line is then dictated: "There came a big spider." Quite often students will be observed to have written only four words:

There came big spider, omitting *a* which in a normal reading of the line would be said under weak stress. Let us say that the teacher has spoken the line several times and notices that the students will have only four words -- a situation which occurred in my class on many occasions. A great temptation exists for the teacher to tell the students that they have omitted the word *a.* However, I feel it is much better to remind the students that they are missing a word, that they should listen for the missing word, and further, that they should apply what they know about English grammar to help them solve the problem of the missing word. With this kind of prompting, some students will suddenly "hear" the missing word. Others will still not be able to figure out what is missing. In these cases, the suggested technique is for the teacher to point to the place in the sentence on the student's paper where the word is missing -- in our example between *came* and *big* -- and tell the student to focus his listening on that "space". The student is not told what is missing; he must listen for it. Quite often this much help suffices. In some cases, though, this still isn't enough. Here one can isolate the words *came a big* and say only this portion of the sentence over and over until the student realizes what is missing. Again, let me emphasize that the three words should be said at perfectly normal speed so that *a* comes out as a reduced vowel blended smoothly in between *came* and *big.* If this is not done, the value of the dictation exercise is lost.

Seating the students so that the teacher can circulate among them facilitates checking on the accuracy of each student's work. As the teacher walks around he can point out with a pencil or finger where errors occur. For example, a common error will be the spelling M-a-f-f-e-t or M-o-f-f-e-t for M-u-f-f-e-t. These spellings reflect, for the most part, phonological interference. At this point the teacher can call on a student to spell the word and as he does, the teacher writes it on the board. Now the teacher says the word repeatedly, indicating that the spelling is incorrect and that the reason for the wrong spelling is mishearing. The teacher then leads the students to discover where the error is. (This is one instance where minimal pairs used on the spot can be effective; i.e., one could set up the name, *Moffet,* as a minimal pair with *Muffet* and give a quick discrimination drill.

Once the entire dictation is complete and the students have the complete rhyme written down, a word or two can be said about the proper form for a short verse -- indented lines, etc. The students might then quickly recopy their verse in the correct form. After the students have a perfect copy of the rhyme, questioning can begin on individual vocabulary items which the students do not understand, e.g., *tuffet* in our example. The teacher will want to draw out of the students that, without ever having seen one, they actually know from the context a lot about what a tuffet is. The meaning of the lines of the verse, or indeed, the entire verse, should be discussed after individual vocabul-

(continued on page 14)

MOTHER GOOSE

(continued from page 2)

ary items have been explained.

The next step in the procedure is where practice in making decisions enters in. To play the game, however, the students must have a clear understanding of the rules of the game. First of all, the verse is considered "data" for the purposes of the game. Secondly, *all* and *only* the information contained in the nursery rhyme may be used to make decisions based upon statements the teacher will make about the rhyme. Students may not reach out into the real world for answers, but must stay within the confines of the "data".

To set the stage for the kind of interchange which ensues, let me first reproduce here our example rhyme:

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on her tuffet
Eating her curds and whey;

There came a big spider
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

The rhyme, as noted above, constitutes a closed corpus of data. All statements by the teacher are based upon it, and must be responded to by the students in accordance with it. A further stipulation is that the information contained in the rhyme is true and not open to interpretation or question. The teacher then begins the questioning, which takes the form of statements by the teacher about something in the rhyme. The student answers "true" if the statement is true according to the rhyme; he answers "false" if the statement is false; and he answers, "I can't tell" if the statement is neither true nor false from the facts.

Here are some examples:

1. *Little Miss Muffet was married.*
(I can't tell)

Note that *was* is the key word here. Perhaps she was at one time and got divorced.

2. *Little Miss Muffet is married.*
(False.)

If she were married, her name would be Mrs. Muffet.

3. *Little Miss Muffet enjoyed eating curds and whey.*
(I can't tell)

Actually Miss Muffet may have disliked curds and whey, but ate them because there was nothing else to eat.

4. *The spider bit Miss Muffet.*
(I can't tell)

The rhyme says nothing about the spider biting Miss Muffet.

5. *Maybe the spider bit Miss Muffet.*
(True)

Maybe the spider did bite her, so this is a true answer.

6. *Miss Muffet was afraid of the spider.*
(True)

Notice here the use of a synonym, *afraid* for *frightened* in the original.

The students in this particular class found this decision-making a real challenge. It is rather difficult to convey this feeling of challenge (and fun) on paper. At first, the students were jumping to conclusions in their decisions. For example, in *Old Mother Hubbard* I made the statement that the dog was hungry. One student replied, "true". I rejoined that we had no evidence that the dog was hungry. Quickly he said, "false". Again, I said he was incorrect. He then returned to his original stand and said that the dog was hungry because dogs are *always* hungry! This exchange brought a good laugh from eveyone which indicated to me that something was happening to their auding ability inasmuch as this incident occurred after about a week's daily work and if something similar to this had happened the second or third day of class there would have been little or no reaction--only a lack of understanding. Of course, the student had 'broken' the rules of the game, but the exchange of language and obvious understanding was exactly what I was after.

The interjection of the word *maybe* presents a new challenge. *Maybe,* obviously, throws a whole new light on the interpretation of the 'facts' and is an example of something which can be used to foster

careful listening on the part of the students.

A variety of things can be taught either directly or indirectly by means of this technique. Suppose that in using *Little Red Riding Hood* (in this case our medium is a very short story rather than a nursery rhyme), we say that *Little Red Riding Hood* didn't like her grandmother. This is totally incomprehensible to a particular culture. In such a case, cultural pressure would most likely force an incorrect answer rather than one according to the 'facts'.

At first, it took a considerable amount of time to get through a single nursery rhyme. Boredom was never a problem, however, beacuse of my pacing. The students knew the pressure was on them. This was evident from the speed of my dictation--the lines of the nursery rhyme poured from my mouth at a really rapid pace. Fumbling attempts were made to take down my dictation; eventually, the constant dinning of the words became more understandable, and they got the gist of what I was saying. Then my pencil or finger pointing to their omissions focused their ears on blank spots in their auding. Improvement in dictation was obvious over the few weeks this particular class met. Answers to my statements in the beginning were often wild guesses, but the keen motivation to understand me soon changed these wild guesses to reasoned answers with a high degree of accuracy. Spot reviews of previously covered materials demonstrated clearly that I couldn't 'fool' them anymore. The material was understood and understood well.

The cultural value of Mother Goose Rhymes for highly-educated young business executives is probably close to nil. Yet, I found the students were interested in the rhymes themselves and were interested to know something about them and their place in American culture, a side-effect which I had not anticipated. This side-effect caused discussion in class and all of this language exchange was extremely beneficial for the students.

A teacher might want to use materials other than the Mother Goose Rhymes and apply the same techniques. One could argue that using current materials would be more relevant, yet I felt that the very novelty of the rhymes was one of the most appealing features. The fact that improvement in auding could be brought about through the use of such seemingly simple materials was intriguing to these sophisticated students.

An important point which experienced language teachers have recognized over the years and one which needs emphasis from time to time is that the teacher's attitude towards the materials being used is an extemely important variable in the whole teaching process. This is made dramatically clear in this particular instance. My attitude towards the Mother Goose Rhymes and the attitude I instilled in the students undoubtedly contributed significantly to the success of this technique.

Footnotes:

[1]I prefer this term to aural or listening comprehension in that it forms a parallel series with speaking, reading and writing.

[2]The class was a volunteer class held in the evening.

[3]Anita E. Harnadek. *Critical Reading Improvement.* (New York: Mc-Graw-Hill, 1969).