

Nursery Rhymes in College: Pedagogical and Psychological Value

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Abstract

In response to research that suggests that in tertiary institutions, student learning and emotional wellbeing are impacted significantly by academic demands, this paper investigates the pedagogical and psychological value of including nursery rhymes in a university course syllabus. It is based on the personal experience of teaching a children's literature course and informed by the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) that invites instructors to reflect on their teaching practices and classroom experiences as well as to share insights to promote scholarly discussion. To answer the research question of whether and to what extent the inclusion of different versions of one select nursery rhyme affected the students' learning experience, an exploratory research design was employed. Validity was established through the application of triangulation by using multiple datasets, both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, and assessment through two learning theories. Elements of the Kirkpatrick evaluation model were adapted to understand the impact on student performance and satisfaction as well as classroom atmosphere and morale. While contradictory insights resulted from the quantitative and qualitative analysis, they indicate that using select versions of one nursery rhyme as a scaffolding tool can be useful, particularly for students unfamiliar with analytical reading as well as critical synthesizing and contextualizing. Such scaffolding allows for a more gradual introduction to literary analysis that can activate prior knowledge, encourage curiosity, and increase active learning, thereby reducing academic anxiety that often results in declining interest and negative psychological wellbeing.

Keywords: active learning, anxiety-reduction, literary analysis, SoTL

1. Introduction

Most of us, as children, probably read nursery rhymes and as adults are aware of their value in a child's language and cognitive development. Some sources furthermore suggest that such rhymes can be useful beyond the nursery, such as to teach English as a foreign language to older learners (Rini, 2017; Sayakhan et al., 2019) or to assist children develop emotional intelligence (Prosic-Santovac, 2015). However, nursery rhymes are excluded from the canon of children's literature and are thus rarely discussed in children's literature studies (Galway, 2017). Even if scholars argue that the rhymes hold veiled meanings by alluding to actual, often violent events (Alchin, 2013; Maiti & Naskar, 2017), little scholarly attention has been paid to the potential impact these rhymes might have. For instance, Al-Ramahi (2013) emphasizes that scholars have ignored how nursery rhymes perpetuate gender stereotypes by foregrounding ideas of masculine power and concealing female experiences. Olayemi (2020) deplores the scholarly focus on historical content and consequent disregard of how English nursery rhymes, which are part of a child's formative years, often promote negative female gender stereotypes. Mahmood and Saleem (2013) stress that many nursery rhymes are "culturally loaded" (p. 291), expressing British ideology and perpetuating for instance racist and sexist notions. Tetrault (2023), who focuses on how these rhymes perpetuate speciesism, also notes that the influence of nursery rhymes, contrary to other forms of children's literature, has "largely been overlooked" (p. 1). Millán Scheiding (2019) in fact argues that this is "an age where nursery rhymes are being abandoned (Scholastic)" and stresses that these rhymes are not "simply entertainment" (p. 36), since they connect children and adults, "open[ing] the door to the child's own generation and socio-cultural awareness" (p. 43).

In light of these claims, this article proposes that nursery rhymes can have pedagogical and thereby psychological value in tertiary education when used as a scaffolding tool to move from simple to increasingly more complex content. Owing to an absence of scholarly research on such use, this article is based solely on the personal experience of teaching a first-year, elective undergraduate children's literature course three times over three years, at a college where English is the language of instruction but not the native language. It is informed by the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) that invites instructors to engage in a systematic inquiry into one's teaching practices and the students' experiences to improve teaching and learning, and then publicize insights to encourage scholarly discussion (Felten, 2013). SoTL, compared to Scholarly Teaching, is considered a useful framework since it helps develop innovative teaching practices instead of researching existing literature to determine the value of a teaching method (Martin, 2007).

Such understanding is crucial since existing literature reveals that student wellbeing is often impacted by academic stress, which leads to anxiety, frustration, resignation, academic dishonesty, and even suicide (Bagalay, 2021; Hansen et al., 2018; Maymon & Hall, 2021). When the method and language of instruction are unfamiliar, students experience even more

stress (Santos et al., 2021). Literature students furthermore experience so-called literature anxiety, which makes it necessary to teach literature “more attentively” (Liau & Teoh, 2021, p. 212). This article responds to this need by presenting how one nursery rhyme, with its adaptations, was used to introduce students to complex discourses on childhood, class, and

gender in smaller chunks, thereby improving the students’ learning experience and emotional wellbeing. It does not claim to have found a generalizable solution or to propose a lowering of standards by using less difficult material, but rather hopes to invite dialogue with members of the academic community on the value of such proposed addition.

2. Research design, research methods, and research analysis model

An exploratory research design was considered most appropriate, given the SoTL framework of this study and the lack of other studies, to gain first insights, generate new ideas and determine directions for future research. Since this article was written retroactively, the choice of research methods was limited. For instance, since students at the time had not provided consent for their performance results to be shared in the future, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) meant that specific grades could not be used for quantitative analysis. Additionally, since this course no longer ran after the third year, further data could not be collected.

To validate the results and arrive at a more meaningful understanding, triangulation was employed. Norman Denzin identified four basic types of triangulation in the 1970s: data triangulation; investigator triangulation; theory triangulation; methodological or method triangulation. A combination of types allows for deeper insights through comparisons and increases the credibility of results, even if often, insights may not agree with each other and encourage new interpretations (Abdalla et al., 2018). First, data triangulation was done by comparing the student-population of the three courses. Second, to arrive at a richer, contextual understanding, mixed methods research was chosen. A quantitative assessment of the numerical items in the end-of-course evaluations was performed to explore cause-and-effect relationships and test the central hypothesis, even if such evaluations are “largely teacher-centric, comprising pre-defined response categories in a survey format” instead of reflecting the “student learning experience adequately” (Steyn et al., 2018, p. 2). Qualitative methods, with their open and unstructured nature, were employed to gain better insight of the student-perspective and to permit unforeseen information to emerge. The data collection methods that were used involved evaluating and comparing student comments provided to open-ended questions in the end-of-course evaluations as well as personal record-keeping notes made during the course duration and the personal course-assessments in module reports. Third, triangulation was applied by approaching learning from both a cognitive and constructivist perspective. Cognitive theory defines learning as a process of acquiring and storing information and suggests that activation of prior knowledge as well as clearer

instructions and feedback can improve the learning process, while constructivist theory posits that knowledge is actively created and learning can be improved both by activating prior knowledge and by encouraging collaboration and exploration (Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015). The evaluation of the syllabus change was based on an adaptation of the Kirpatrick Model, developed in the 1950s for the purposes of organizational training programs. While the use of this model in higher education is criticized as having limitations (Cahapay, 2021), it is also considered as useful in evaluating curriculum innovation (Paull et al., 2016). It includes four levels: reaction expresses the level of satisfaction; learning the increase in knowledge and skills; behavior the application of learning in other contexts; and results the impact (Cahapay,

2021). For this paper, reaction was considered student satisfaction in light of the increased use of the nursery rhyme versions and learning as improved analysis skills. The third element was viewed as changes in class engagement, while results were defined as improved morale. The insights that emerged, mainly out of the qualitative inquiry, confirm that the use of a nursery rhyme as a scaffolding tool increased satisfaction and affected academic performance overall positively, while class atmosphere, morale and observed psychological wellbeing were impacted significantly.

3. Context

The first year the course was offered, of the twelve registered students, 60% were literature or linguistics students, and 40% studied different disciplines. The latter group confessed that they had chosen the course in the hope that children's literature would mean light readings and easy assignments. The Learning Outcomes (LOs) of the course were, besides learning the practice of close reading and the function of different literary elements, to understand how texts engage with dominant ideologies as well as construct identities and the notion of otherness. The course involved a take-home assignment with two essay questions and one final exam. The reading material consisted of late nineteenth and early twentieth century children's stories. Among the literary works for the first assignment – which asked students to examine the construction of the child and masculinity - were Beatrix Potter's illustrated *The Tale of Tom Kitten* (1907) and *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers or The Roly-Poly Pudding* (1908). The first is the story of kitten Tom and his two feline sisters who are obliged by their mother to don uncomfortable attire because she is expecting guests for tea, and upon losing it owing to their carelessness are sent to their room. The latter narrates Tom's abduction by rats to turn him into food which results in him becoming a traumatized adult cat that, unlike his sisters, fears hunting rats. Students were asked to read the material at home, while analysis took place in class. Only self-produced PowerPoint presentations were employed to explain context and terms of literary analysis.

The next year, 11 students registered, again with 60% being English majors. This time, the analysis of Potter's stories was preceded by an in-depth discussion of a long narrative poem

called *The 3 Little Kittens*, published anonymously in 1880 and illustrated by Kate Greenaway (1846–1901). This poem is one of the most complex versions of a simple nursery rhyme about three little kittens that lose their mittens and are therefore not allowed to eat pie, a cautionary story about childhood mischief that dates to British folk tradition. *The 3 Little Kittens* includes the mitten-loss, but also describes how three kittens, anthropomorphized and gendered as female, attend picnics and balls, ultimately getting married. While Potter's kitten-stories have little in common with this plot besides a sartorial mishap that leads to an upset mother denying the kittens pie or tea, it was hoped that a comparison of plot and illustrations in two coming-of-age stories would allow students to better comprehend the complexities surrounding social context and provide increased opportunities for class discussion. In the take-home assignment, students were asked to compare and contrast the theme of growing up or the construction of social expectations.

The third year, all six students were non-English majors. Potter's Tom Kitten stories were removed to revise the reading list, but *The 3 Little Kittens* poem remained as part of the take-home assignment. The discussion of this poem was preceded by simpler versions that became

increasingly more complex and that functioned as formative, non-assessed material. It was hoped that these rhymes would allow for scaffolding, on the one hand simplifying the presentation of themes and literary analysis and on the other increasing the level of complexity and encouraging students to draw upon previous learning. Versions were selected based on how they could be employed to discuss a specific text's contribution to the construction of identity, ranging from childhood to class to race and to gender. The following sections present how some of the discussed versions were employed to acquaint students with literary analysis

and how students increasingly demonstrated critical thinking. The discussion should not be considered as offering a full analysis.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 The practice of close reading: The child and childhood

The introduction to the nursery rhyme was made through two seemingly simple versions discussed in a mock review by British politician William Ewart Gladstone, under the pen name Bartholomew Bouverie in 1827. It was pointed out that while Bouverie claimed that the English version (Table 1, left) is "treacherously pilfered" from an "ancient" Greek manuscript (p. 70), the Greek employed suggests that the supposed original might be more recent (Table 1, right). Students were provided with a self-made translation (Table 1, middle) and asked to consider why the author might have chosen to include these two different versions. According to them, the intention was probably to add humor to the didactic message: be careful with your clothes. This reminded them of stories in their native language they had been told as children, something which encouraged them to share memories of their upbringing and reading.

Table 1

The supposedly pilfered version is:	The original version, written in a mixture of ancient and purist Greek (the archaizing form of Modern Greek), free translation ¹ :	The supposed Greek original, as included in the discussion (p. 70):
<p>The cat and her kittens They put on their mittens, To eat a Christmas pie. The poor little kittens They lost their mittens, And then they began to cry. “O mother dear, we sadly fear We cannot go to-day, For we have lost our mittens.” “If it be so, ye shall not go, For ye are naughty kittens.”</p>	<p>A cat, with (its) kittens, Donned the woolen mittens, The Christmas’ Holy bread to eat. Alas, poor kittens The woolen mitten is gone, And then they started crying. “Oh, oh, mother, mother, we are terribly afraid We cannot, cannot go today, We do not have mittens” If of course this is how it is today That you do not have (wear mittens [sic]) cheeky sperm Bad feline sperm.</p>	<p>“ Γαλή, σὺν τοῖς ἀιλουριδίαις, Ἐρισπλέκτους χειρίδας ἔδυ, Χριστογενεθλίου Ἴρῶν λάγανον κατεδόντες. Ἦμοι ταλάων ἀιλουριδίων Ἦλοε χειρὶς ἐρισπλεκτος, Τότε δ’ ἤρξαντο ζοναχοῦντες. Ἄλι, αἰ’ μήτερ, μήτερ, δεινὰ δεδοίκαμεν Ἦουκ, οὐκ ἴτέον, σήμερον ἡμῶν, Ἦουκ ἐμπόδιαι χειρῖδες. Εἶγ’ ὡς τὰδ’ ἔχει, σήμερον ἡμῶν Ἦου μὴν ἴτέον, σπέρμα πονηρὸν Σπέρμ’ ἀιλούρων κακοειδές.”</p>

This activation of prior knowledge served as an opportunity to introduce views on children and childhood during the time of Enlightenment, as shaped for instance by John Locke’s theory of the so-called tabula rasa in the late seventeenth century, which rejected the view of the child as inherently sinful and posited the need for discipline tempered with forgiveness. They were asked to consider how such views corresponded to their upbringing and how the poems might present these contrasting perceptions.

To introduce the approach of close reading in an engaging manner, students were asked to compare, in pairs, the versions and identify specific words that might express different constructions of the child. They initially stated that both versions promote the image of the honest child by depicting the kittens as informing their mother of the mitten loss, but upon further exploration demonstrated both engagement and critical thinking. Their focus was the depiction of the supposedly Greek mother whom they described as verbally abusive. They considered the terms “cheeky sperm” and “[b]ad feline sperm” inappropriate, wondering why a nursery rhyme does not contain more neutral terms such as “seed” or “spore”. Some students speculated that the supposed ancient Greek version might have been included to illustrate how the perception of the child as inherently sinful belonged to bygone times and to show that while punishment was necessary, it was equally important to not be abusive, physically or verbally.

4.2 Motif, image, and symbol: Social classes

To help students improve contextual awareness and analysis skills, a longer version found in many contemporary nursery rhyme collections such as *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* (1955) and published by Eliza Lee Follen (1787-1860), a Sunday School teacher and an

abolitionist, in 1833 was used. The first part resembles the supposedly pilfered version but continues after the mittens are retrieved:

[...] And you may have some pie
Purr-r, purr-r, purr-r [...]
O mother dear,
We greatly fear
That we have soil'd our mittens.
Soiled your mittens!
You naughty kittens! [...]
The three little kittens washed their mittens [...]
O, you're good kittens.
But I smell a rat close by [...]

This version was used to enhance contextualization skills and illustrate how literature can reflect discourses on social class. Initially, students perceived the poem as having the same plot and didactic message as the previous two versions. The added text was seen to emphasize the notion that the child can be taught improvement through discipline tempered with rewards.

To invite critical thinking, students were asked whether they agreed with author Janet Sinclair Gray (2004) that the cats' depiction as having moved from barnyard existence into farmhouse domesticity and the collective attention to the mittens should be considered as the felines trying to become part of the bourgeois class and therefore trying to adhere to manners and decorum. Within this context, the literary device of 'motif' was introduced: the mittens as a tool to express social commentary. First, students were briefly informed of the emergence of what was coined in 1811 as the "middle class" which was seen to destabilize existing class structures. The upper classes experienced disdain for the group of people they considered to have come into money and own property but be uncivilized, while the members of this new class experienced disdain for the lower classes they considered to be uncivilized (Thompson, 1988). The suspected rat-appearance that disrupts feline domesticity was used to introduce the literary elements of image and symbol as well as to further explain social context. After asking students to recall stories they had read as children that featured a rat, it was explained that this figure, besides being an expected image in a poem featuring cats, can have symbolic power, suggesting poverty and disease. It was explained that in contemporary debates on class, the home functioned as a cultural site, with hygiene and cleanliness being an "indicator of moral and social standing" (Grigg, 2008), while the lower working classes who often lived in unsanitary conditions were constructed as filthy, depraved, even criminal (Beier, 2005). To demonstrate how the mittens might function as a literary device to express social commentary, extracts of contemporary etiquette books were introduced. Attire was shown to have a "signifying role as opposed to its functional role" (Perrot, 1994, p. 8). For instance, in Britain, it allowed the middle class to "distance" itself from the working class and express "respectability" (Perrot, 1994, p. 20). In America, absence of dress etiquette was associated with the growing class of newly rich (Day & Stewart, 1844). Students found it particularly

interesting that girls were expected to visualize both virtue and class via dress and that gloves, seen as expressing character and social status, had to be “ignorant of blemish” (A Gentleman, 1836). When asked to identify through close reading instances that reflected the poem’s participation in the discourses on class, students focused on the felines’ inability to keep the mittens clean and the house pest-free. Increased engagement and analytical thinking became apparent when students argued for instance that this inability might suggest a lower-class character. This led students to discuss present-day constructions of marginalized groups, which they considered quite similar to those of the working classes at the time, and also discuss the role that children’s literature may have in perpetuating stereotypes, something they had not considered before.

4.3 Putting it all together

The last version discussed was the long narrative poem *The 3 Little Kittens* used in Year 2. This poem is almost identical with Follen’s version but continues with a portrayal of the kittens’ life following the rat appearance.

[...] These kittens so gay
Were invited one day
To feast by a running stream [...]
And each went to sleep
Curled up in a heap
And had a most lovely dream.
Purr, purr, purr, purr. [...]
One night in the Fall
They went to a ball,
And danced to a lively tune [...]
And with holes in their mittens
These careless kittens
Came home by the light of the moon.
Miew, miew, miew, miew. [...]
These kittens 'twas said
Were soon to be wed; [...]
And cats, one and all, [...]
Were loud in the kittens' praise.
Miew, miew, miew, miew. [...]
The three pretty brides,
And their husbands besides
Took rooms in a very nice flat;
Not a rat nor a mouse
Was e'er seen in the house [...]

This long version was employed to introduce students to changes in class discourse and changes in the construction of femininity. It was first explained how the position of women had changed in the last century in terms of social expectations, sexual mores, and educational opportunities. Students were then asked whether the kittens' behavior and particularly their mitten-treatment could be read – in contrast to the previous versions - as an endorsement of social movement and changing gender norms of the late Victorian times. The following illustrates the students' increased familiarity with close reading and the ability to identify deeper meanings of verbal text. One student asked whether the kittens' described conduct suggested not just a flouting of (social) manners, but of (sexual) morals, pointing out that while the picnic-description almost idealizes a childlike innocence, this ends abruptly when they attend the ball. Students remarked that on the one hand, when the kittens get “holes” into their mittens at the ball, the repeated “miew[s]” at the end of the stanza appear to express the same message of the need for sartorial (and moral) propriety. On the other, they claimed this mitten-adventure might have a more complex meaning, given that the next stanza announces an impending marriage quite abruptly – and, while supposedly everyone is “loud in the kittens' praise”, the stanza ends with repeated “miew[s]”. An example of the positive atmosphere in class is that some students shily or (slily) argued that the word “holes” and the late return home might then suggest not sartorial but sexual impropriety, leading to a hasty marriage (giving rise to extensive chuckling). Students were clearly more confident in drawing associations between literary text and social environment, arguing for instance that if indeed the kittens had disregarded sexual mores, then the story's ending with the kittens being happily married and financially secure, suggested support for this flouting, or, at least, lack of condemnation.

They also discussed the rat-figure, stressing that while the rat again makes its appearance in this version at their mother's home, the grown-up kittens live in a pest-free home. Students again demonstrated their increased ability to draw conclusions by arguing that if the parental home was associated with a lower class owing to the rat-figure, then the absence of rodents in the marital home might suggest that the young felines had married up, and that the repeated “purr[s]” at the end of the last stanza, indicated support for social change and a more liberal construction of femininity.

5. Results

5.1 Numerical Insights

Insights based on the quantitative elements of the end-of-course evaluations and grades seemed at first sight not meaningful and it appeared that changes to the syllabus had not had a particularly significant impact (Table 2).

Table 2

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Overall course satisfaction	4.67	4.50	4.75
Course material and understanding of subject	4.67	4.60	4.75
Verbal and written communication skills	4.33	4.10	4.00
Critical thinking	4.83	4.40	4.50
Pace of course	4.67	4.40	4.75
Class interaction and learning	4.67	4.50	4.50
Teaching methods and learning	5.00	4.60	4.50

However, statistical analysis led to more confusing results. An ANOVA test (Table 3) demonstrated that variance was between 0.0096 and 0.05 and that the differences between groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$; $F > F$ crit). This means that the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between specified populations can be rejected and that observed differences are not random. In other words, quantitative analysis suggests that syllabus changes did have an impact.

Table 3

ANOVA						
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Between Groups	0,644533	6	0,107422	3,506165	0,024878	2,847726

It is true that small sample sizes, as was the case in this study, often fail to provide accurate results. Additionally, the response rate for the evaluations was not similar throughout the years: only 50% responded the first year (6 of 12), 90.91% (10 of 11) in the second, and 88.87% (4 of 6) the third. This means that while the response rate for the two last years is comparable, it is significantly higher than in the first year.

Still, based on these not ideal quantitative insights, the nature of the impact was unexpected since statistical analysis disproves expectations of how the introduction of a nursery rhyme and then its versions was perceived by students. For instance, while in the third year, overall satisfaction with the course as well as with material and pace scored higher, satisfaction decreased regarding the contribution of class interaction and teaching methods to learning as well as regarding the encouragement of critical thinking. Surprising was also that students did not experience the addition of a nursery rhyme (Year 2) or rhyme versions (Year 3) as having improved their verbal and written communication skills. It is true though that compared to the second year, scaffolding seems to have led to some improvement. Overall, within the Kirkpatrick framework, the differences in responses were not sufficient to provide a meaningful interpretation.

Additionally, the grades, especially in the first and the third year, did not show meaningful differences (specific grades cannot be published owing to GDPR). In the first year, students overall did well in the assignment, even though the essays were more descriptive than analytical. Student performance decreased overall in the second year. In both years, English

majors performed better than students from other disciplines. In the third year, it was interesting that the students, all from other disciplines, performed better in the take-home assignment than those in previous years. The overall final grade was good in Year 3, better than the year before, and, compared to specifically students from other disciplines, better than in both previous years.

What became clear by comparing the three data sets was that on a numerical level, student performance had not been affected significantly by scaffolding efforts and that students themselves did not perceive their experiences in a significantly better light. From both a cognitivist and a constructivist perspective, learning had in other words not been significantly impacted by changes to material, activation of pre-existing knowledge or increased active learning through discussions or group work. Within the Kirkpatrick framework, the implemented change was not as successful as expected regarding learning (Level 2) and class engagement (Level 3), but successful regarding satisfaction and morale (Levels 1 and 4). However, the small sample size increases the margin of error and questions the validity of these findings.

5.2 Qualitative Insights

Furthermore, the elements defined by the Kirkpatrick model that were assessed through field work and participant-observation, offered different insights than the ones gained through quantitative analysis and demonstrated that students had met the course LOs in the third year much more than in the previous years.

In the first year, open-ended questions on course evaluations indicated satisfaction with the course material; one student commented that they had acquired insights into children's literature. The personal observations recorded in the journal and the module report record student satisfaction with the course and confirm the quantitative responses provided by students. While class discussions had confirmed that students comprehended context and the basics of literary analysis, the students' written performance - of all majors - demonstrated that the analysis lacked context and depth. A review of the feedback provided reveals that even work assessed as good did not fully meet expectations, with the most common comment being the need for more analysis and more contextualization. This clearly disproves the students' self-assessment in the course evaluations that their critical thinking skills had improved (Table 2). From a cognitivist perspective, learning had not been as successful as expected and different methods had been needed to help students form new and more complex schemata by teasing out pre-existing knowledge that would lead to improved processing of the material. From a constructivist perspective, the missing element might have been that the course had not contained sufficient opportunities for active engagement.

The following year, and while students had expressed their enjoyment in class, student essays did not demonstrate enhanced understanding of social context or provide a more thoughtful analysis. The evaluation of the essay-feedback reveals that the inclusion of the narrative poem did not improve student performance as expected and that essays were still more

descriptive than analytical – even if the students had indicated in the course evaluations a relatively high score in critical thinking skills (Table 2). Disappointing was also that the essay-feedback frequently mentions disregard of historical and social detail, despite the nursery rhyme being used precisely to draw attention to the importance of socio-historic context and even though students indicated relative high satisfaction regarding how class interaction and teaching methods had contributed to learning (Table 2). Furthermore, the answers provided by students to the open-ended questions in the course evaluations again showed that the course was considered interesting and the PowerPoint presentations useful, but this time the theory-part was described as tiring. Surprising was furthermore that while student verbally expressed enjoyment about discussing the illustrations, the open-ended questions in the end-of-term evaluations did not refer to this. From a cognitivist perspective, this means that changes to the syllabus and material had not had the desired effect to improve mental processes and learning, and from a constructivist perspective, that the increased opportunities for active learning had not had the expected results.

The third year, feedback on the take-home assignment indicates improvement compared to the previous years, with some essays being assessed as “perceptive” and praised for acknowledging social context. This clearly disproves the students’ own assessment of whether the course encouraged critical thinking and the teaching method improved leaning (Table 2). In the open-ended questions of the course evaluations, students expressed enjoyment in finding information through close reading and in groups as well as analyzing pictorial text. Oral student comments confirmed the assumption that students would not feel overwhelmed – as they said, they enjoyed analyzing the long narrative version, with its slightly saucy innuendo, the most, while Bouverie’s version had served as an amusing icebreaker and had captured their interest in how a simple poem might contain deeper meaning. This data also confirms the students’ own evaluation of a positive learning experience owing to teaching methods and class interaction (Table 2). Possibly, the lower or same score compared to the two previous years can be explained by the fact that these were non-English majors who had not engaged in literary analysis before. Class-engagement overall made it clear that the use of the rhyme as a scaffolding tool had positive effects. From both cognitive and constructivist perspectives, it activated prior knowledge created through earlier reading experiences and then motivated engagement by asking students to uncover alternative meanings. The application of gradually developed new concepts and skills to a complex text then demonstrates successful transfer. From a constructivist perspective furthermore, this use gave students the opportunity for collaboration and active learning through which they constructed their own knowledge. That might also explain why students in this data set (non-English majors) performed better than their counterparts in the previous two courses.

6. Conclusion

The above discussion has indicated that while quantitative and qualitative results lead to different, albeit confusing, conclusions, the implemented change affected the students' learning experience, particularly for students less familiar with literature and the practice of critically analyzing, synthesizing, and contextualizing information. Approaching this change through the lens of an adapted Kirkpatrick model indicates that the use of the rhyme versions allowed students to develop their skills in smaller steps and acquire deeper understanding of social context. This in turn appears to have had an impact by increasing student confidence and improved psychological wellbeing.

It is true, this study has limitations. First, the insights gained through the Kirkpatrick model within the higher education environment tend to be limited to the lower levels since evaluating changes in behavior and outcomes is more difficult (Cahapay, 2021). Second, the quantitative results are based on small sample sizes and different cohorts, something which makes it uncertain whether the numerical responses are significantly different to confirm or reject the hypothesis that the use of (versions of) a rhyme improved the students' learning experience. As such, insights cannot be generalized. Furthermore, insights based on qualitative enquiry are subjective and not generalizable. The conclusions drawn, mostly retroactively, are based on limited data and subjective interpretations of records based on personal observations and student comments, without considering for example whether students were being honest or influenced each other. Additionally, this paper is based on the insights of one specific person, collected in retrospect and with a particular agenda in mind, gained by teaching one particular course in one specific country. Still, triangulation does indicate that scaffolding through the nursery rhyme versions increased overall satisfaction and morale as well as helped specifically students from other disciplines who were unfamiliar with literary analysis.

As pointed out at the start of this paper, the main purpose of this article is to ignite a discussion and inspire other instructors to use a nursery rhyme in literature but also other courses, such as for instance history or gender studies. Of interest would also be more in-depth and methodological analyses, using a more experimental design, after having received ethics approval, which could offer more generalizable insights. The hope is that the findings of this paper might serve as a tentative blueprint for future course design or will at least lead to a discussion as to the merits of its suggestions.

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