“For it’s All in Some Language I Don’t Know!” Responding to Nonsense Poetry in the Primary EFL Classroom

Short title: Nonsense Poetry in the Primary EFL Classroom.

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Abstract
This paper explores the use of two nonsense poems in the primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom with Swedish pupils. Adopting a reader-response approach, the study aims at exploring whether and in what ways 12-year-old language learners respond to two nonsense poems by Lewis Carroll. Poetry has been argued to be a challenging genre for students and teachers alike (Tsang et al., 2023). Teaching approaches and choice of texts are defining factors in students' reception (Tsang and Paran, 2021). By incorporating texts that balance playfulness and seriousness and challenges sense, learners and teacher can be rid of the pressure of finding one supposedly correct answer and engage in creative interpretation. The poetry lessons in this study were video recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis as described in Braun and Clark (2006). The results indicate that pupils respond differently to the distinct characteristics of the two poems. Furthermore, nonsense poetry, linguistic or situational, offers different stimulations for children to creatively engage with the target language and literary interpretation. By integrating unconventional texts, such as nonsense poetry, teachers can diversify their materials and let learners lead interpretation and assert their agency. Ultimately, the playfulness of the texts and the multiplicity of interpretation help make both poetry and language learning accessible for children, while promoting the development of literary competence. Future research could benefit from exploring the longitudinal effects of nonsense poetry in language development, the incorporation of different nonsense genres, or the impact on specific language skills and age groups.

Keywords: poetry, literature, language learning, reader-response, children's literature, EFL, nonsense poetry

Poetry can be used to great benefit in the language learning classroom. It can stimulate self-reflection, provide new perspectives and be an aesthetic and emotional experience in itself (Hanauer, 2001; Hanauer, 2004). Yet teachers, especially in primary school, avoid using poetry in their language classrooms, ostensibly for lack of knowledge and/or fear of it being too difficult or irrelevant reading material for their pupils (Mart, 2021; Paran, 2008; Tsang et al., 2023). Nonsense poetry stretches the boundaries of right and wrong and mixes the rule-bound with the whimsical. This creative freedom could potentially lower the children's performance anxiety, while encouraging engagement with poetic interpretation and the target language. The aim of this article is, therefore, to provide examples of how nonsense poetry can engage young learners in literary study and in language exploration, by showing how 12-year-old pupils respond to and make meaning of two classic nonsense poems by Lewis Carroll: "Jabberwocky" and "The Walrus and The Carpenter". The study seeks to answer the following research question: How do primary EFL learners respond to linguistic and narrative features of nonsense poetry, and what interpretive strategies do they employ?

The place poetry holds in primary language education is closely related to the way it is introduced and approached in the classroom (Paran, 2008; Tsang and Paran, 2021). When looking into the learners' perspectives towards poetry in the language learning classroom, the body of research suggests that learners tend to have neutral to negative attitudes. The participants often indicate that they find it difficult to relate to poetry, to understand or to approach it, which is often attributed to the selection of texts or teaching approaches (Tsang et al., 2023; Tsang and Paran, 2021). In Sweden, for example, poetry is one of the less used genres in primary language learning classrooms (Wolcott, 2023). Children's poetry that recognizes the value of the formal and the whimsical, while aiming at generating multiple instead of foreclosed meanings, may be important for promoting "a lifelong love of poetry" (Grenby, 2011, p. 104). In this context, nonsense poetry highlights the playfulness, creativity and freedom of poetics (Bedamatta, 2013). This can balance the rigid character of poetry, language and interpretation, making them more accessible to young learners.

As the teaching approach is also a factor that affects children's attitudes to poetry, this study adopts a reader-response approach. As Rosenblatt (1994) explains, meaning emerges from the interaction between the text and the reader's personal experiences, which leads to multiple possible interpretations. Building on Rosenblatt's view, literary competence refers to a reader's ability to engage consciously and reflectively in this process (Calafato and Hunstadbråten, 2025). While Rosenblatt emphasizes that readers bring individual backgrounds and emotions to a text, Alter and Ratheiser (2019) show that literary competence allows readers to recognize literary features, reflect on their own responses, and support interpretations with textual evidence, thereby transforming subjective reactions into grounded interpretations. In this study, two poems with nonsense elements, written by the same writer, are read and discussed in two primary EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, where the lessons are video recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Nonsense Poetry and Interpretation in the Classroom

While poetry can be of great value for children, it is rarely used in the primary EFL classroom. Once learners achieve linguistic competence, they tend to focus on the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of literary texts (Hall, 2015). For precisely this reason, poetry is significant for young children: it channels their instinct to play with language and helps them explore the gap between words and the world. However, primary EFL teachers rarely use poetry with young language learners. As mentioned earlier, a study that focused on the role of literary texts, in the Swedish upper secondary EFL education, presented data from approximately 11% of all upper secondary teachers of English in Sweden. Wolcott (2023)

found that poetry is generally less used compared to novels or short stories, even though its use increases in higher grades (p.103). When some of the teachers were interviewed on their choices of texts, they mentioned that students can relate more to other literary texts than poetry (p. 145).

This, in combination with the aforementioned negative attitudes caused by teaching methods and text selection, creates a need to explore teaching approaches and texts that positively engage students in the poetic experience. In this context, introducing nonsense poetry in the language classroom could be one way to engage young learners with poetry and interpretation. Badamatta (2013) argues that nonsense poetry can inspire language play, awareness, bridging of meanings, sounds, and words, and can reflect cultural traditions that come from oral cultures. Additionally, a nonsense text experiments with the limits of common sense, and rather than restricting the text to a single meaning, its playful disruption of sense creates many possible interpretations (Lecercle, 1994). Heyman (2003) defines literary nonsense as a "balance between sense and non-sense" in which the reader encounters both the presence and the absence of meaning simultaneously. In the classroom, this balance creates a space where interpretation is not prescribed but negotiated. Heyman (2003) further stresses that nonsense is itself a rebellious genre that resists fixed meaning. Hence, children who attempt a literary interpretation of nonsense texts are offered interpretative autonomy and an opportunity to see ambiguity not as a barrier but as opportunity.

Heyman (2003) also notes that writers, such as Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, reacted against the moral didacticism of Victorian children's literature. Their nonsense liberated readers from moral instruction and invited playful engagement with language, logic, and imagination. In contemporary classrooms, this liberating impulse can make literary study more accessible. Nonsense texts lower the stakes: their linguistic inventiveness and absurd scenarios remove the pressure to find a single "correct" interpretation and replace it with curiosity and exploration. Activities, such as inventing new words, reinterpreting nonsensical imagery, or comparing alternative readings of a poem, like Carroll's "Jabberwocky" may recreate the experience of interpretation in a way that feels open and enjoyable. As Heyman observes, nonsense continually resurfaces in times of cultural or educational constraint. Bringing it into the classroom today can once again open a space for creative interpretation, linguistic experimentation, and enjoyable participation in literary meaning-making.

Introducing texts that resist fixed meaning foregrounds children's role as readers of literature, because they are called to discover their responses to it. This study adopts the reader-response theory to explore the responses nonsense poetry evoked in young language learners. According to Rosenblatt (1982) there are two kinds of reading stances people adopt––efferent and aesthetic stances. When one reads to seek information in a text, the efferent stance is followed. When one reads paying attention to the emotions, ideas, and perspectives evoked during reading, the aesthetic stance is adopted. Both kinds of reading might occur simultaneously and interchangeably. For example, when reading a literary text, we might adopt an efferent stance, looking for information (characters, plot, place, time etc.), but we might also adopt an aesthetic stance, embracing the emotional impact the reading has on us, along with the reactions and reflections generated with the evocation. During aesthetic reading, readers respond to the text, and they resort to past experiences and associations with words, things, and texts to construct meaning. Typical responses include empathizing with characters, entering the story, identifying with situations, or reflecting on conflicts and feelings we read about. Rosenblatt (1994) further asserts that literary meaning-making lies in the reciprocal relationship of the text with the reader, which she calls a transactional relationship. In a transactional interpretation, meaning does not exist solely in the text or in the reader, but it arises from their relationship during the act of reading. The reader responds to the signals of the text, a process that helps to shape the final meaning.

The emphasis that reader-response theory places on the reader's active role can become especially visible in encounters with nonsense poetry, where meaning is unstable and interpretive effort is highlighted. This invites consideration of how readers recognize patterns, draw on previous knowledge, and tolerate ambiguity. These capacities are theorized in Alter and Ratheiser's (2019) concept of literary competence. Alter and Ratheiser (2019) propose that literary competence can be seen as a set of sub-competences readers can develop through working with literary texts. These are: empathic competence, aesthetic and stylistic competence, cultural and discursive competence, and interpretative competence. Empathic competence refers to the reader's ability to relate with the text at a personal level. Aesthetic and stylistic competence describes the ability to express the emotional responses, and the role stylistic elements play in these responses. Cultural and discursive competence refers to the reader's ability to engage with the cultural representation of the text and reflect on expectations or roles presented in the society described in the text. Lastly, interpretative competence refers to the learner's ability to infer meaning from a literary text. Interpretative competence is dependent on the other sub-competences because they will affect how the learner can attribute meaning to the text as a whole (Alter and Ratheiser, 2019). A theorized account of literary competence offers a systematic way of incorporating literary texts in the EFL classroom and of understanding the nature of learners' engagement with literature.

An example of the application of this concept in understanding learners' engagement with literature can be seen in Calafato and Hunstadbråten (2025). The study operationalized literary competence through a combination of assessments, questionnaires, and interviews, offering an empirical investigation of the variations across these dimensions. The results indicated significant differences across the sub-competences and among the learners. Participants demonstrated stronger interpretative and empathetic competences than aesthetic-stylistic and cultural-discursive competence (Calafato and Hunstadbråten, 2025). These results suggest that literary competence is unevenly developed and can be influenced by factors such as reading strategies, tolerance for ambiguity, and modes of information processing.

The Logic of Nonsense: From Jabberwocks to Walruses
The two poems that were chosen for the poetry lessons were “Jabberwocky” and “The Walrus and The Carpenter”. When Alice first reads “Jabberwocky”, even if she doesn’t understand anything, it fills her head with ideas that she cannot put in words (Carroll, 1872). Soon she understands that “somebody killed something” (p.24). The poem opens in the following way:

> Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
> All mimsy were the borogoves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe.

(Carroll, 1872)

The first stanza, composed mostly of nonsense words, is repeated at the end, while other neologisms are scattered throughout the remaining stanzas (Sundmark, 2017). Alice’s first encounter with the poem resembles that of a novice learner with a foreign language. Nevertheless, the fact that her first comment is some kind of interpretation suggests that even a poem with inverted nonsense words may create some kind of response to the reader. This can be seen as an allusion to the fact that poetry has the power to create meaning with means beyond the verbal language, as it can be highly suggestive, symbolic, and imaginative. The nonsense words are combined with ordinary articles, prepositions and conjunctions, meaning is still generated, while the narrative coherence somehow balances out the semantic confusion (Lecercle, 1994; Sundmark, 2017).

As Sundmark (2024) explains, the existence of “Jabberwocky” in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, while unnecessary for the plot, is meant to evoke enjoyment in the language play it provides, and “prompts further translation, creativity, and reflection” (p.10). A bit later in the novel, one realizes that the existence of “Jabberwocky” is also an opportunity for Humpty Dumpty to showcase a big part of his personality: a pompous, self-anointed linguistic authority and a parody of the Victorian philologist, whose fragile confidence and confusing definitions expose the absurdity of claiming mastery over language. Another function of the poem is to reflect ideas about empire and heroism (Kelen 2024). Kelen (2024) argues that the poem functions as a parody of imperial and heroic narratives by exposing the violence and absurdity found in traditional rites of passage into adulthood. Using nonsense elements in a seemingly epic poem dramatizes the child-to-adult transition and shows how absurd those conventions are, when stripped of their ideological seriousness. Kelen (2024) further explains that the reference to Alice’s queendom indicates Carroll’s foretelling new forms of authority and childhood power where “Jabberwocky” contributes by destabilizing traditional adult heroics and subverting adult logic. In other words, by presenting the epic journey in playful nonsense, Carroll undermines its seriousness, showing that the adult world’s heroic ideals are themselves nonsensical.

The second poem used in the study is called “The Walrus and The Carpenter”. The poem opens in the following way:

> The sun was shining on the sea,
> Shining with all his might:
> He did his very best to make
> The billows smooth and bright —
> And this was odd, because it was
> The middle of the night.

(Carroll, 1872)

This poem is about a walrus and a carpenter who cunningly lure a group of young oysters out of the sea and then proceed to eat them. The poem delays Alice’s journey, breaking the main

narrative and maintaining the dreamlike character. Recited by the Tweedles, the poem reflects their enjoyment of reciting absurd stories and moralizing in nonsensical ways, which accentuates their comic roles. The poem also foreshadows later authority figures Alice will face.

Although this poem does not entail nonsense wordplay, it bears characteristics of logical, situational, and moral nonsense. Logical nonsense is exemplified in instances where the sun is shining at night or that the beach has too much sand. By creating a world where familiar reasoning applies in absurd ways, the poem highlights the instability of logic itself. The entire scenario is an absurd situation. It is through this situational nonsense that Carroll presents violence and cruelty in a palatable form. White (2017) adds that nonsensical anthropomorphism is used to discuss human cruelty. By making the idea of predation funny, children can feel okay about the small fish being eaten and accept it as a normal part of life. Upon listening to this poem, Alice tries to judge whether the walrus or the carpenter is morally worse, but the poem does not make the moral clear, thus playing with moral nonsense. Alice soon decides that both the walrus and the carpenter are unpleasant characters (Carroll, 1872, p. 79). Thus, the poem functions as a commentary on the arbitrariness of moral judgements by exposing adults who perform sympathy or politeness while behaving cruelly. This poem is filled with imagery, symbolism and absurdism, and it contains theatricality, plot, memorable characters and timeless thematic range, all of which offer plenty of literary, linguistic and pedagogical possibilities for pupils to explore.

Method

The study was conducted in two English classrooms of Grade 6 (12-years-old), in a primary school in Sweden, with 48 pupils in total. After the project had been reviewed by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, written informed consent and assent were collected from all participants (pupils and the teacher) and their legal guardians, for the lessons to be video recorded. The data was collected, stored, and handled in accordance with the stipulations of GDPR and the Review Authority. Both classrooms were taught by the same teacher. The teacher had not used poetry in her English lessons before this study. I created a lesson plan as reference, which the teacher was free to adapt to her teaching and classroom. In total, about 6 lessons were dedicated to poetry in each classroom. My role was to attend the lessons, provide help to the teacher, if necessary (e.g., distributing copies), take field notes, and record.

Each lesson lasted roughly 45 minutes and was structured in a way that incorporates readaloud of the poems, literary discussions, creative writing, and dramatization. After introducing Alice, the teacher read “Jabberwocky” and asked the pupils to share their first impressions, mainly around the plot, the characters, and the traits of the poem. To encourage emotional expression while reading poetry, an activity was performed during which pupils had to read stanzas from the poem expressing a certain emotion. The second lesson on “Jabberwocky” focused on pupils reading the stanzas. The teacher encouraged deeper discussions about the poem and its language, as well as literary devices such as *symbolism* or *imagery*. Pupils also worked on translating a stanza from “Jabberwocky” in their native language, as homework. After presenting their translations in the third lesson, they read Humpty Dumpty’s explanation of the poem and they created their own portmanteau words, using a worksheet borrowed from the website *Alice Sound* (London Symphony Orchestra, n.d.).

The next lesson introduced the second poem. Because “The Walrus and The Carpenter” was longer, the teacher read half of it. The lessons followed the same pattern as in “Jabberwocky”. In the following lesson, pupils worked in pairs to prepare a creative writing assignment, which was to write a stanza in groups, adopting the perspective of one of the

characters. This lesson concluded with the children presenting their poems. After this lesson, they discussed the themes in "The Walrus and The Carpenter", and the teacher made a recap of both poems. The poetry lessons concluded with pupils performing a drama-based activity. They prepared and performed freeze-frames or pantomime in groups, with the aim to represent one key scene or theme of one of the poems.

To analyze the material, I first, inserted the audiovisual data into the Transana software, which provided automated transcriptions. Thereafter, I manually edited them, replacing the participants' names with pseudonyms. It is worth mentioning that throughout the study I have navigated between an emic and etic perspective (Haskell et al., 1992) as a result of my background in language teaching and in literary study. Thus, regarding my positionality in the analysis of the data, I strive to remain open and reflexive to the participants' emic experiences and I maintain a researcher (etic) perspective throughout the analysis and interpretation of the results. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), I thematically analyzed the transcripts, focusing on each poem separately. During the familiarization with the data, I noted initial ideas by marking respective passages.

During the coding process, I looked for instances where pupils expressed some kind of response to the poems and coded the respective sections. In practice, each passage that indicated some kind of response was assigned a code that described the response. Figure 1 shows an example of the coding process.

Excerpt	Code
T: Perry, what do you say? **Perry**: It's maybe a dangerous animal...because it says Beware the Jabberwock my son...and the jaws bite and the claws catch.	1. Emotional response -danger 2. Linguistic cues to make meaning 3. Literary devices contribute to meaning making (tone, imagery-warning-danger)
Vin: Brilliant. **T**: Why are you thinking brilliant? **Vin**: Because of the brilli...but the lig I'm not sure.	1. Etymological assumption

Figure 1. Example of Coding Process

Next, I collated the codes into potential themes using hand-drawn thematic maps. To reach the initial themes, I compared the codes within and across transcripts. Related codes were then clustered into initial themes which I then reviewed against the full dataset to ensure coherence. After reviewing the themes and analyzing the specifics to each of them, I cross-referenced with my initial notes and field notes. As a result, I identified two themes in each poem, discussed in the following section. Examples from the transcripts are provided. Some examples include Swedish utterances that have been translated by me (translations provided in brackets) and verified for accuracy by native Swedish speakers. While care was taken to preserve meaning and nuance, some subtle aspects of the original interactions may have been altered in translation. To enhance transparency, the original Swedish utterances are also included.

Results: Pupils' Responses to the Poems

Responses to "Jabberwocky"

When pupils read "Jabberwocky," they first approached the stylistics and prosody of the poem to construct meaning (*poetic technique*), and then they engaged in an investigation of the language (*linguistic exploration*), to reach deeper interpretations.

Poetic technique describes instances that pupils used cues from the poetic devices and the prosody to construct meaning. When the teacher first read the poem, by asking questions, she tried to retrieve the pupils' first impressions of the poem:

179. **T**: Even if we don't understand all the words, there are clues to how the Jabberwock looks.
181. **Vera**: It seems like they're like in the jungle...like in the wild.
182. **T**: So, we are in the woods or in the nature. Why? (...)[1]
183. **Vera**: They say a lot about trees.
184. **T**: We see trees. Which characters can you find in this poem?
185. **Kevin**: A father and a son. (…)
197. **T**: What else is happening?
213. **Vera**: I don't know it seems like the mom or dad is like telling the son to be careful or something.
214. **T**: Why should you be careful? (…)
216. **Vera**: The animals.

Although after the first reading of the poem many words seemed unfamiliar to the pupils, by responding to the teacher's prompts, they indicated a level of engagement and inferential understanding despite vocabulary limitations. Vera was based on the imagery of trees, forests, and animals to gain an understanding of the environment (181), thereby exhibiting aesthetic competence. Vera's expressed impression of a warning against some kind of danger (213) that can be attributed to the tone of the poem also exemplifies empathic competence, because of her emotional response to the text. Kevin identified a father as the speaker of the poem (185), demonstrating interpretative competence as he relies on plot elements to create meaning. In a more careful exploration, pupils could spot some familiar words, such as "woods" or "jaws", and provide a description of the Jabberwock:

141. **T**: And there is something called the Jabberwock. What is the Jabberwock in this poem?
142. **Kevin**: a scary monster of some sort. (…)
149. **T**: Could it be something else?
150. **Jim**: Like some big creature.
151. **T**: Is it a good creature, helpful?
152. **Jim**: No.
153. **T**: So, it has some bad qualities….
154. **Kevin**: It could hurt you real bad. (…)
158. **Vera**: Because when you see the Jabberwock...it's like they're describing it when it says the jaws that bite the claws that catch. It's like a creature that has sharp jaws and big...(inaudible).

In the examples above, pupils construct meaning from the poetic technique by picking cues from the ominous tone of the poem and the imagery. Kevin identifies a scary monster (143), while Jim adds that it is a big creature (150). Pupils perform an efferent reading, because they look for information in the text to answer to the teacher's prompts, but also an aesthetic reading at the same time, because they express emotional responses of fear or peril. By exploring the features of the narrative of the poem as well as by expressing their emotional responses to it, pupils demonstrate both interpretative and empathic competences. Vera's comment (158), further indicates that the imagery helps her "see" the character, indicating her response to the devices of the poem and an application of stylistic competence.

[1] Indicates that non-related talk has been omitted.

The nonsense wordplay itself, with the neologisms and playful ambiguity, can also be considered one of the literary devices of the poem. Even without decoding it, the existence of it already gave pupils the idea that this poem takes place in another world:

298. **Yanni**: It has very many words I do not know.
299. **T:** What does that make the world it describes?
300. **Yanni**: Maybe it means that they don't speak the same there, like words, so it's maybe another place.
(…)
304. **Dan**: So, wouldn't that mean that these words would have meaning in this another place?
305. **T**: Yeah, that's what I'm asking you. What does it mean, reading this, knowing it describes a place, but you don't really understand the words?
306. **Dan**: Language barrier?

The interaction above is an example of how pupils constructed meaning through their engagement with literary devices, such as nonsense wordplay. Specifically, after Yanni confirms that she does not understand many words (298), she later mentions that this takes place in another world where they speak a different language (300). Dan adds that these words should have meaning for the people of that world, a situation he experiences as a language barrier (306). These examples suggest that pupils see the nonsense wordplay as a device, used to symbolize something, such as language barriers. This indicates pupils' active meaning making rather than passively receiving an interpretation from the teacher. Furthermore, it can be seen as an example of how pupils explore the impact stylistics have on their reading of the poem and make inferences that lead to interpretation, hence exhibiting both stylistic and interpretative competence.

The prosody of the poem is another element of the poetic technique. The rhyming scheme, for instance, was something that helped pupils explore the pronunciation of the unfamiliar words. In the following example, Kai has read the first stanza of the poem and has mispronounced the nonsense words "toves" and "borogoves" saying /tovɛs/ an /borogovz/. The teacher directed his attention to the rhyming scheme, so that he could figure out the pronunciation of the words:

46. **T**: Can you find any rhymes?
47. **Kai**: Yes, toves [/tovɛs/] and borogoves [/borogovz/][2].
48. **T**: So, you have to end it in the same way. If you say toves [/tovɛs/] you have to say borogoves [ˈboːrogoʊvz/].
50. **Kai**: Borogoves [ˈboːrogoʊvz/]. And then wabe [/weɪb/] and outgrabe [/ˈaʊtgreɪb/].

When Kai understands how rhyming works in the words "toves" and "borogoves" (50), he proceeds to pronouncing "wabe" and "outgrabe" following the rhyming pattern. In this case, by introducing the poetic term of rhyme the teacher promotes awareness of literary conventions and subsequently pupils' stylistic competence. At the same time, when language is stripped of meaning, other aspects of it surface, such as rhythm and phonology. Thus, though device spotting might have been criticized, the teacher uses the rhyming scheme to her advantage, to bring pupils' attention to the phonological elements of the nonsense words.

Pupils' stylistic and interpretative competence can also be seen in their explorations of other poetic devices, such as onomatopoeia. When the teacher directed pupils' attention to the

[2] My phonological transcription of the utterance, as I hear it in the video.

unfamiliar words, pupils seemed to attribute meaning using the onomatopoetic nature of the words:

316. **T**: The word snicker-snack. What's that?
317. **Ola**: Whoosh!
318. **T**: He wants to symbolize something.
319. **Cole**: Very much blood.

Ola's answer might seem insignificant at first glance. However, thinking that "whoosh" has a similar onomatopoetic function as "snicker-snack," indicates that he employs an interpretative strategy of inferring meaning through phonological cues. Cole's imagery of "very much blood" (319) aligns with an interpretation of a bloody action taking place.

Linguistic exploration, the second theme among the pupils' responses to "Jabberwocky," describes instances that pupils engaged in an etymological, syntactic, and connotational exploration of the language of the poem to reach semantic and later literary interpretations. In the second lesson, pupils read stanzas aloud in the classroom and they discussed them. This closer reading of the poem brought attention to the language. The pupils' answers to the teacher's prompts indicated that they made etymological connections to create meaning:

57. **T**: It was brillig, and the slithy toves, did gyre, and gimble in the wabe (…).
59. **Ola**: Brillig can mean brilliant.

Ola's answer is an example of making an etymological connection of the word "brillig" to the word *brilliant.* If they have the same root, they might be synonymous, considering the derivation in language. Another example of etymological consideration was the word mome;

88. **T**: And the mome raths outgrabe. What's a mome? (…)
91. **Kevin**: Maybe it's a recreation of a gnome?
92. **Vera**: Yeah exactly!

In the example above, Kevin assumes that the word "mome" could be a reimagining of a garden gnome (91). Although in the poem it works as an adjective describing the raths (*mome raths*), the teacher refers to it as "a mome" (88), leading pupils to understand it as a noun. Thus, Kevin's assumption could be seen as following an etymological logic, because it resembles etymologically, phonologically and morphologically the word *gnome*. Following the rules of English morphology, the word *mome* indeed resembles more a noun than an adjective; thus, the readers' assumptions follow the rules of the language. In this process pupils engage with the structural aspects of the poem, exhibiting stylistic competence.

Pupils also considered syntactical aspects. Kai suggested for instance:

73. **Kai**: Twas means it was. And I think toves is like crazy or weird.
74. **T**: But I think toves is a thing.

"Twas" is at the beginning of the sentence: "Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre...". After establishing that "brillig" might mean *brilliant,* an adjective, Kai's (73) comment is an example of a consideration of the syntax, because a subject and a verb should precede the adjective *brilliant.* This exemplifies how nonsense wordplay entails real language traits pupils can explore. However, he later adds that "toves is like crazy or weird", which seems rather contradictory to his syntactical understanding so far. We can either assume that Kai refers to the "toves" as creatures that are weird, or that the stretching of boundaries nonsense entails has led him to ignore what seems to be a plural marker (-s) at the suffix of the word. In any case, his interpretation of "crazy" or "weird" is still in line with the essence of these creatures. The teacher prompts him to consider that this word could be a noun (74). In

another example, Vic considered the nonsense words as compounds, demonstrating a strategy of making meaning based on the structural aspects of words:

327. **Vin**: Is the word wabe...ee..a word..mixed? (…)
329. **T**: The words are mixed. Good analyzing…. Do you have an idea which words?
333. **Vin**: Wave be?

Although “wabe” might not seem like a compound, Vic thought that mixing words together might be one technique of creating them. His suggestion aligns with the formation of noun-verb compounds in English (e.g. babysit or handshake) and with Humpty Dumpty’ explanation that these are portmanteau words, a term that describes two meanings packed in one word.

The phonological resemblances of the words gave cues that led pupils to different interpretations:

164. **T**: What's the jubjub bird? (…)
167. **Kevin**: It's a bird of some sort, but it seems like a pterodactyl, maybe?
168. **T**: Are there two monsters?
170. **Kevin**: Yeah. Maybe it's a bird that doesn't do anything, like useless. (…)
172. **Kai**: I think the jubjub bird is like another name for the Jabberwock.

Kevin understands that the Jubjub bird is another creature in the forest, but because this is referred to as a bird, he does not consider it as dangerous, and perhaps even “useless” (170). Nevertheless, Kai considers the phonological resemblance of Jubjub and Jabberwock, or maybe the element of repetition in the poem, and infers that it is another name for the Jabberwock. This exemplifies how pupils consider different aspects of the language of the poem and have different responses. This example further showcases how this poem invites multiple interpretations, encouraging pupils’ imagination.

Responses to "The Walrus and The Carpenter"

During the reading of "The Walrus and The Carpenter" pupils followed a different approach indicating that they responded to the characters and their behaviors. Reading this poem evoked some ethical considerations among pupils. They often resorted to personal experiences and knowledge to make interpretations (*knowledge of the world).* Moreover, pupils discussed the characters and their motivations (*characterization),* emphasizing their ethical and critical responses to this poem.

Knowledge of the world refers to instances that pupils drew from personal experiences to make interpretations. For example, after reading that the oysters trusted the wrong people and got eaten, Brooke recalled an incident she had read in the news a while ago, which was a situation where a teenager trusted the wrong people, and suffered fatal consequences:

> 524. **Brooke:** Det var samma sak...som...jag tror det var en sån händelse. en tjej...jag kommer inte ihåg (…). Hon sa att hon ville gå till sån sleepover, och hon trodde att hon skulle ha roligt, och hon dog. [*It was the same thing…that…I think something like that happened. A girl…I don't remember… she said she wanted to go to some sleepover and she thought she would have fun and she died*].

Bringing this up in the classroom suggests that, when reading this poem, Brooke made connections between the fantasy world and the real world. She also used these connections to make sense of it. When the pupils discussed, at the end, what this poem is about, some of the things they named were trust and deception, indicating a connection between their discussions and these associations. These responses demonstrate pupils interpretative competence, as they were able to make personal connections and inferences about the meaning of the poem.

Other pupils mobilized cultural schemas to interpret parts of the poem, such as the nonsense scenery, where the sun is shining in the middle of the night:

> 170. **T**: And I'm confused actually. Because I don't know if it's night or day (…).
> 173. **Ola**: Summer! Summer! It's summer! (…)
> 177. **Vera**: Like when it's day the whole day, then it's suddenly and then it's in the middle of the night but it's still sunny.

While the teacher is confused with the absurdist imagery of the sun shining in the middle of the night (170), the pupils find logic behind it. By making connections to their cultural reality, where daylight lasts until late at night during the summer season, pupils interpret the absurd element of the poem. These examples suggest that children recontextualized the poem and interpreted it based on their contemporary cultural reality and experience, while making it personally relevant, thereby activating their cultural-discursive competence.

Characterization refers to instances that pupils focused on the characters' motives, emotions, and behaviors to make literary interpretations, offering a vivid example of their empathic competence. For example, the pupils used inferential reasoning by interpreting the characters' motivations and personalities based on their actions:

> 336. **T**: So how are you if you are a person that someone trusts and believes in, but they are lying?
> 337. **Chris**: Backstabber.
> 338. **T:** Backstabber. They are deceitful. They are manipulative.
> 339. **Anna**: Hypocrite.
> 342. **T**: How is a manipulative person, what is he /she doing to make others believe you even if you are lying…?
> 343. **Sam**: You act nice. (…)

345. **Brooke**: They are two-faced.

Establishing that the walrus and the carpenter are backstabbers (337), hypocritical (339), and two-faced (345) was essential for later deciphering the symbolism or the themes of the poem by drawing connections between the characters and themes of greed and deception. At the same time, through characterization pupils were exposed to relevant vocabulary and used it in meaningful context. The teacher further guided the pupils to express their responses by providing synonyms, by expanding their answers, while maintaining the flow of conversation in the classroom.

Pupils also engaged in an ethical evaluation of the antagonistic characters, by exploring the characters' motives:

358. **T**: So why are they doing this?
359. **Steve**: Because they have to.

When the teacher asked why they act this way, Steve said they were obligated (359), indicating an understanding that the characters cannot go against their predatory nature and they need to hunt in order to survive. Analyzing the characters yielded multiple interpretations among children and allowed them to examine different perspectives. Pupils' perspective-taking regarding the characters is demonstrated in the following interaction. Kevin, for instance, interpreted the carpenter as a follower, who just goes along with the walrus' actions even if deep down he might not want to eat the oysters:

255. **Kevin**: Something makes me feel like he doesn't really want to do this and just following what the walrus says
256. **T**: He is a follower...
257. **Kevin**: Yes. The walrus is the leader. The carpenter maybe has some good in him. He doesn't want to do this.

Because in the poem the carpenter is not as verbally active as the walrus, Kevin seems to be interpreting the carpenter's absence of talking as guilt. Kevin thinks perhaps that he is not talking because he is guilty or intimidated by the leader. This can be seen as an example of how Kevin's personal experience shapes his response to the poem and his interpretation.

On the contrary, Ola, Ellie, and Verona, in the example below (lines 268-273), mentioned that the carpenter is not talking because he doesn't want to seem suspicious or appear to be poor at lying, attributing to him a cunning and deceiving character:

266. **Ola**: He doesn't want to seem suspicious.
267. **T**: How could he avoid that?
268. **Ola**: By being quiet.
269. **Ellie**: No talking. (…)
271. **Vera**: Maybe he knows that he would like mess it up. He's not good at lying. He's like I am not going to eat you at all.

These pupils' responses differ from Kevin's, suggesting that the use of personal knowledge significantly shapes how literary characters are interpreted. The difference in pupils' interpretations aligns with the function of the poem to create moral ambiguity and let the readers lead interpretation. This difference can also be seen as an example of pupils' employing empathic competence to interpret the text. As their personal connections are grounded in different experiences, they make different assumptions and interpretations about the characters. The pupils' engagement with characterization and their incorporation of personal experiences into interpretation suggest an aesthetic reading stance.

The teacher's follow-up questions encouraged pupils to consider the characters' personalities and potential motives, prompting them to engage in inferential reasoning, further strengthening their empathic competence:

5. **T**: How are you as a person if you can think like that?
6. **Kai**: Evil
7. **T**: Yes, I agree. To just destroy something or change something just because you want it. Could be evil.
8. **Vera**: There's a certain hatred towards...maybe trauma.
9. **T**: Okay, so something in their history (…).
10. **Ola**: Självisk, att man gör vad man vill, jag vet inte...(inaudible) [*Selfish, that one does whatever they want, I don't know...*]
11. **T**: Selfish. (…)
12. **St**: Evil. (…)
14. **Gemma**: Arrogant! (…)
16. **Kevin**: You probably don't care about anyone and try to do what's best for you.

The pupils' ethically critical responses surfaced, as they associated the characters with arrogance, evilness, and selfishness. Verona further considered that trauma might be one reason for someone to act like that (8), indicating an effort to empathize with the characters.

In another example, pupils tried to understand the perspectives of the oysters, indicating the pupils' emerging ability to analyze character motivation and to use perspective-taking as interpretative strategy.

255. **T**: They really want to go with the walrus and the carpenter. How is that…?
256. **Sanna**: Because they think they're going for a pleasant walk. (…)
263. **T**: Why do they want to leave the oyster bed? And go with the walrus and the carpenter?
264. **Chris**: Curiosity. (…)
316. **Brooke**: Because they really want to have something new to do. They are bored.

Chris and Brooke (264, 316) interpreted the oysters' choice to trust two strangers as a need for a change, an action of curiosity for a new experience. In the process of characterization, there were instances that pupils expressed their empathy for the characters. Brooke said for instance (398):

395. **T**: Do they care?
396. **Chorus**: No!
397. **T**: They are very selfish.
398. **Brooke**: They are selfish and not nice (…). They are so mean. I feel so bad for the oysters.

Overall, the multiplicity of interpretations through *characterization* was an opportunity for pupils to empathize with the characters. They could dive into several perspectives, question, and make critical reflections. These highlight the ethical responses children had on this poem, and the responses that came from aesthetic reading.

Discussion: Exploring the Language and the Literature in Nonsense Poetry.
Nonsense poetry challenges the idea of right and wrong interpretation and rejects the existence of one supposedly correct meaning. This flexibility can be encouraging for young language learners to engage in literary interpretation in the EFL classroom. In this study, children's responses to two canonical nonsense poems by Lewis Carroll are explored. The analysis of video recorded lessons indicates that reading "Jabberwocky" evoked pupils' responses to the poetic technique and the linguistic features of the poem. On the contrary, reading "The Walrus and The Carpenter" evoked children's responses to the ethical aspects of the poem. In this case, they focused more on the characters and their personal experiences to make interpretations. These results provide examples of how nonsense poetry (1) can create possibilities for young learners to explore the target language, (2) can encourage creative literary interpretation, (3) can invite readers' diverse responses and multiple interpretations, and (4) can contribute to pupils' development of several aspects of literary competence. The limitations of the study can be the short intervention duration or the novelty effect potentially influencing children's engagement. Yet, the encouraging results suggest that further research into unconventional texts, like nonsense poetry, can be of great benefit in language and literature teaching.

When reading a poem that incorporates nonsense wordplay, phonology, syntax, and grammar become more prominent. This created various possibilities for children to interact with aspects of the English language. "Jabberwocky" is one of the most popular nonsense poems. As Sundmark (2017) mentions, "the vocabulary of the poem is both innovative and challenging" (p.45). Made-up words are blended with "ordinary English articles, prepositions, and conjunctions" (p.45) which, along with the epic ballad structure, create an evocative and meaningful framework that can be used for interpretation. Although pupils in this study did not know what exactly those words meant, the realistic morpho-phonological nature of the words helped pupils infer some meaning. According to Rosenblatt (1994), verbal symbols evoke complex networks of internal responses, including ideas, attitudes, and social concepts. Thus, even though children's semantic competence was limited, the nonsense vocabulary still evoked internal responses that helped pupils make meaning. Additionally, the linguistic playfulness, creativity, and challenge provided pupils with opportunities to explore the structural aspect of the words in order to make sense of them. This idea is supported by Bedamatta (2013), who argues that language play and nonsense texts encourage learners to focus on formal properties of language. Indeed, pupils often resorted to an etymological and morphological investigation of unknown words, such as when Ola assumed that "brillig" meant *brilliant*, considering both the root and its word class. This illustrates how learners treated unfamiliar words as decomposable structures rather than arbitrary signs. Drawing on linguistic features to make literary interpretations of poetry can be an opportunity to see how language can be used to convey meaning, intent, emotion, and experience.

Despite the linguistic challenge of this poem, pupils realized that cues from the poetic technique can be of use to their interpretations. Pupils responded to the cues of the tone, the imagery, the rhyming scheme to make interpretations or to decipher the pronunciation of unfamiliar words and later their meaning. This indicates how pupils engaged with the literary aspect of language and how it is used in poetry to evoke different responses. When pupils considered the symbolic meaning of having nonsense wordplay, for instance, they explored how linguistic play and nonsensical elements can function symbolically to construct alternative worlds. Pupils engaged with poetic devices and techniques and used them to make literary interpretations. While the poem plays with ambiguity and nods between sense and nonsense (Heyman, 2003), the poetic technique allowed pupils to make meaning. The rhyming scheme, imagery, and tone served as cues that enabled children to form their interpretations. In this way, children could engage in literary interpretation and familiarize

with the function of literary devices. As Bedamatta (2013) suggests, nonsense creates semantic gaps that prompt learners to attend to formal and stylistic features, allowing them not only to construct meaning but also to develop awareness of how literary devices function within a text. This close exploration of the stylistic and structural features of the poem invited the application of pupils' aesthetic and stylistic competence, an aspect that can engage learners in a more complex exploration of the text and a distinct aesthetic experience with literature (Alter and Ratheiser, 2019).

"The Walrus and The Carpenter" maintains the nonsensical and whimsical tone in a different way–through situational and moral nonsense. The poem revolves around the characters' choices, motivations and consequences (or lack of) of their actions. This poem evoked pupils' personal and ethical responses, suggesting that they followed an aesthetic approach to reading (Rosenblatt, 1982). While previous studies suggest that poetry is often irrelevant or difficult for children (Mart, 2021; Tsang and Paran, 2021), pupils in this study were able to activate relevant knowledge about the world in order to make personally relevant interpretations. Additionally, their active responses to the poems refute poetry as difficult for young language learners. Despite their young age, learners associated the characters' motives, behaviors, and actions to things they have heard, seen or experienced in their contemporary realities. These exemplify how children recontextualized this 100-year-old poem and reflected on diachronic, universal and complex themes, such as deception or betrayal. As Rosenblatt (1994) argues, meaning is constructed through a transaction between the reader and the text. Thus, by associating characters' motives and actions with their own experiences, pupils engaged in a transaction with personal and cultural realities shape poetic interpretation. This strengthens the idea that poetry interpretation is a socially and experientially mediated process in which learners rely on personal and cultural schemata to make meaning. In doing so, pupils can strengthen their empathic and cultural-discursive competence. Strengthening these competences paves the way for pupils to engage with varied emotional and situational experiences at a safe distance and to understand language as a bearer of culture, values, and underlying discourse (Alter and Ratheiser, 2019).

These two poems, written by the same writer, inspired not only different interpretative approaches, but also various interpretations. Pupils had different reflections on the Jubjub bird for instance, with some thinking that it is another name for the Jabberwock, and others suggesting that it is another rather harmless creature of the forest. In the case of "The Walrus and The Carpenter", some pupils thought that the carpenter, by remaining quiet, was suspicious, while for other pupils silence indicated guilt. This variety of responses exemplify how pupils' imaginative interpretation can be stimulated when using poems that play with ambiguity through nonsensical elements and that allow experimentation. In this case, the readers take a protagonist role in literary interpretation and are encouraged to assume, infer, imagine, and explore different parts of the poem in the process. When the texts themselves suggest that there is not a single correct interpretation (Heyman, 2003), literary study can become less intimidating and more inviting to young learners.

Pupils' different responses to the poems are closely related to the different literary sub-competences that are prioritized and employed by the learners in these moments. As suggested in Calafato and Hunstadbråten (2025) learners exhibit varied strength in literary sub-competences, with a tendency towards personal interpretation and emotional engagement. In this study, however, when pupils worked with nonsense wordplay in "Jabberwocky" they demonstrated their aesthetic and stylistic competence, as they relied on the linguistic, structural, prosodic and stylistic elements of the text to make meaning. This suggests that when the denotative meaning becomes ambiguous and other elements of the language become more prominent, learners are invited to explore the literary principles of the construction of the text to create meaning. In this process literary engagement is not only

pleasurable but also serves as a means of understanding the mechanisms of literature and how they shape diverse aesthetic experiences for the reader. The situational and logical nonsense encountered in the second poem accentuated pupils empathic and cultural-discursive competence. Pupils resorted to their personal experiences and emotional resonance to make sense of the poem and explore the underlying discourses and symbolisms. Through this lens, nonsense poetry can be seen as fertile ground for developing pupils' literary competence, and for understanding how the different elements of the nonsense poems invite readers' diverse sub-competences. Nonsense poetry invites play with sound, rhythm, and ambiguity and therefore encourages learners to focus on how literary texts create meaning rather than on fixed interpretations. The awareness of how literary texts create meaning directly contributes to literary competence by making the constructed nature of literary texts visible. This aligns closely with Alter and Ratheiser's (2019) understanding of literary competence as the ability to engage with texts aesthetically, reflect on literary conventions, and tolerate ambiguity, despite limited language proficiency. By encouraging multiple interpretations and creative engagement, classroom practice can cultivate learners' ability to experience literature aesthetically while developing critical and reflective reading skills in the foreign language.

Valuing pupils' varying interpretations subsequently leads to a rethinking of assessment strategies beyond searching for a single correct answer. Assessing children's engagement with nonsense poetry should value interpretive processes, personal response, and learners' awareness of form, language play, and literary conventions. Open-ended tasks, reflective commentaries, creative responses, and peer discussion can therefore be used as valid assessment formats. Such approaches emphasize learners' developing interpretive competence and engagement with literature rather than linguistic accuracy alone, aligning assessment more closely with the goals of literary learning. At the same time, assessment can be understood as developmental rather than purely evaluative. If assessment of literary study is conceived as opportunities for pupils to develop literary sub-competences, then a pupil's initial inability to offer a personal response to a nonsense poem, for instance, should not be treated as failure, but as an indication of where further learning is needed. Classroom practice can therefore integrate assessment moments that scaffold engagement, such as guided reflection, modelling of personal responses, or collaborative discussion before asking pupils to attempt the task again. Such an approach aligns assessment with learning by emphasizing progression, reflection, and revision. Assessment thus becomes a process of supporting pupils in acquiring aesthetic awareness, interpretive confidence, and reflective skills, rather than merely measuring what they can already demonstrate at a single point in time.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore whether and how young language learners respond to texts that deconstruct the intimidating character of poetry and interpretation and give the reader the leading role. The results indicate that the nonsense wordplay in "Jabberwocky" created opportunities for children to explore linguistic and poetic features. Children used cues from the stylistics, the prosody, the etymology, and the morphology of the language to make meaning. On the contrary, the situational nonsense in "The Walrus and The Carpenter" evoked ethical responses in pupils, who investigated the characters and their motives and mobilized personal and cultural schemata to make interpretations. These findings suggest that the different characteristics of the poems encouraged different interpretative approaches among pupils, stimulated various responses, and promoted the development of several literary sub-competences. Rather than applying a single approach mechanically, pupils adjusted their strategies, demonstrating that they are active meaning-makers. This highlights the textually anchored but reader-dependent nature of interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1994). Thus, poetry teaching should provide a variety of texts and scaffold multiple interpretative

strategies, enabling pupils to cultivate adaptive interpretative and reading skills. In addition, pupils could experience how language in poetry can generate vivid imagery, convey meaning, and evoke emotion, despite vocabulary limitations. By challenging conventional sense and logic, nonsense poems can enhance interpretative freedom, making them particularly valuable for EFL teachers. Incorporating unconventional texts, such as nonsense poetry, can expand the range of classroom materials, while allowing learners to lead interpretation, exercise agency and develop literary competence. At the same time, adopting a reader-response approach in poetry teaching can be conducive not only to pupils' engagement, but also to critical and creative thinking in poetry interpretation. Further research can include the role and form assessment may take in this context, more systematic ways to explore specific aspects of language development, or how different nonsense texts engage learners in meaning-making.

Declarations

The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr: 2024-01547-01). Participants and their legal guardians have provided informed consent and assent.

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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