



Snakes & Ladders

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Music and Rhythm for Young Learners

by Aleda Krause

Music and rhythm are an essential part of language learning for young learners. If you're a teacher of young children, I'm sure using songs and rhythmic exercises is part of your repertoire. It would be hard to imagine teaching without them! But why are songs and chants such powerful and effective tools to use with our young learners? And when and how should we use them in our classes?

Word Play

Young children learn about their world through play. They play with toys and with other children. Their play experiences help them to understand the world around them. In the same way, small children play with words. They repeat sounds and rhyming words; they mix up words and say things backwards; they make up non-sense words and chants. They organize their experiences and their understand-

ing of the world around them by finding out what words do and what they can do with them (Beaty, 1998, p.274).

Parents usually encourage children to use language by playing word and action games with them, but a lot of language play is solitary. Children hold monologues with themselves and manipulate the sounds, patterns, and meanings of words they have heard. Children play with language sounds by repeating a word or words they have heard in a singsong manner, often substituting consonants, blends, or vowels: "Happy, mappy, lappy, shappy, cappy, pappy". Pattern play involves manipulating a structure. The child begins with a pattern and repeats it, substituting a new word each time: "Cookie all gone; Mommy all gone; Daddy all gone; kitty all gone". In meaning play, children make up non-sensical meanings for words they learn or create new words or meanings.

Schwartz reports young children during water play with sinking and floating objects, telling the objects to “sink-up” (meaning float) or “sink-down” (1981, pp.19-20). By playing with language in these ways, children are making themselves familiar with the elements of the language they are learning.

Researchers have also found that children who do early rhyming activities have an interest in poetry and words when they are adults; and children who have experiences with nursery rhymes and songs are more successful later when they begin reading (Caplan & Caplan, 1983, p.41).

It makes sense, then, for teachers of young children who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL) to encourage rhythm, rhyming, and word play in English. But, how can we do that? Unlike children who are learning their first language, our young students are not surrounded by English. They don't hear people using English all the time and encouraging them to use it too. We have to do that in our classrooms. But don't we already have a lot to do? Where can we find time to encourage interest in word play in our young learners? Well, it appears that singing stimulates these interests. So by using rhythm and music, we are helping our children not only learn English today, but also stock up for the future.

Speaking Versus Singing

It also seems that singing, which is controlled by the right

hemisphere of the brain, can occur even when speaking, controlled by the left hemisphere, is limited. This is especially important in an EFL situation with young learners. It means that children who do not yet speak English can sing in English. They may not understand all the words, but they sing or chant along with the teacher and the other children, getting the practice that is so necessary in learning a language.

Music and rhythm also make it much easier to imitate and remember language, rather than words which are just spoken. Have you ever heard a song that you just can't get out of your head? Can you remember: “I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony. I'd like to buy the world a Coke to keep it company.” ? Or how about: “I wish I were an Oscar Meyer wiener. That is what I truly want to be. 'Cuz if I were an Oscar Meyer wiener, everyone would be in love with me.” ? People who write television and radio commercials know that short and snappy tunes and jingles stay in our heads—even if we don't want them there! In the same way, if we teach children a song, it somehow sticks in their minds, the way words and sentences alone often don't.

Songs, chants, and rhymes are particularly useful in a stress-timed language like English because the rhythm forces us to put the stress in the right places. At the same time pronunciation is improved as children concentrate on sound rather than meaning (Reilly & Ward, 1997, p.34).

Songs With Actions

Good songs have lively and catchy melodies and fun words. Better songs have actions that children can do to the music. The best songs include both: words to sing and actions or dance movements to do. When children do the actions while they're singing, kinetic memory adds another way for the children to remember. The physical movements also keep the children interested in and enjoying the song long enough to start learning the words.

When to Sing Songs

When do you like to sing in your lessons? I'd like to suggest that songs and chants can be used at any time during a lesson: "Songs can play an important part in every unit and every class period. They are most effective when they are an integrated part of the curriculum, selected for their relationship to all of the activities and vocabulary in a class period and not regarded as an add-on, or filler" (Curtain & Pesola, 1994, p.367).

i. At the Beginning

We can use a favorite or familiar song at the beginning of the class to mark the change from Japanese to English. Our young learners spend most of their lives in a Japanese language environment. They only have the chance to hear and use English one, maybe two, hours a week. We need to help them quickly get into "English mode". A familiar song, perhaps a "Hello Song" or other song they particularly like, is a great way to do this. It helps them get settled into the class and signals that now we will be using English.

ii. To Introduce New Vocabulary

Words and collocations are among the most important things we want young learners to retain. Does it sometimes seem to you, however, that everything you introduce in one lesson is forgotten by the next? Children need to practice words and phrases in order to remember them, but simple repetition is often boring. Why not introduce and practice new words in a chant or song? Religious practices have long recognized the mystic power of chanting. When words are linked to rhythm and music they seem to have more emotive significance and so are remembered better (Reilly & Ward, 1997, p.34).

Vocabulary chants are easy to make up. I attended a presentation recently by Carolyn Graham (the originator of *Jazz Chants*), in which she talked about how she makes

vocabulary chants. First, she chooses a topic (because words are retained better in context). Then, she chooses words for her chant according to how many syllables they have. There are a few different syllable patterns that she frequently uses (*see fig.1 for examples*).

iii. To Introduce or Practice a Dialog

Dialogs are another important part of my lessons with young children. I feel it's necessary to teach children how to communicate with other children and adults in English, in order to help them develop socially. I remember trying to teach a class of little ones the simple dialog "How are you?" "I'm fine, thank you.". It seemed no matter how many times we practiced the dialog, when they returned the next week, I would say, "How are you?" and they would reply, "How are you?". In exasperation, I made up a little song and dance that went:

Hello. Hello. Hello. How are you?
I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. Thank you.

We practiced the song and dance and everyone had a great time. The next week, when the first little girl walked in, I asked her, "How are you?". She started to say, "How are..." but I stopped her and tried again, this time singing the question. She confidently (and correctly!) sang the answer back to me. The next week she could answer without the song. It was the music and movement that helped her and the others to learn the response.

I find the same thing happens with any dialog I want the children to learn, so now I teach all dialogs as songs or chants. We learn them together, then we practice them. Sometimes the children make pairs and we sing the dialogs to our partners while doing appropriate actions. Sometimes we do a whole group activity while singing the dialog song. And sometimes we do crafts, and make a prop to use when we sing the dialogs.

You can make your own dialog chants, too. Here are a few tips:

1. Always stress the right words (I'm indebted to Setsuko Toyama for these guidelines):
 - A. Stress content words like nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, "this"/"that", question words, and negatives.
 - B. DON'T stress function words like pronouns, prepositions, modals, articles, or the verb "be".
 - C. But DO stress contrasts (He said yes but she said no. /

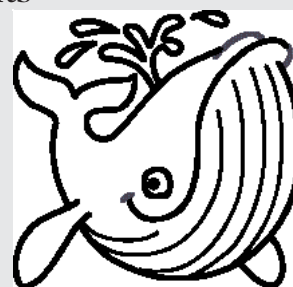
FIG. 1: Syllable Patterns with Example Chants*

A. 3/2/1/X X B. 2/2/3/3 C. 2/1/2/1 D. 2/3/1 X X E. 1/X/1/X/3/1	tangerine, apple, pear, X, X** mango, cherry, banana, banana lemon, plum, cherry, peach kiwi, strawberry, orange, X, X peach, X, pear, X, papaya, plum	submarine, dolphin, shark, X, X starfish, seahorse, jellyfish, jellyfish seaweed, shark, seahorse, shell shipwreck, treasure chest, crab, X, X fish, X, shark, X, octopus, whale
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Two or more patterns can be combined to make a longer, more exciting chant:

Tangerine, apple, pear, X X
 Tangerine, apple, pear, X X
 Lemon, plum, cherry, peach
 Tangerine, apple, pear, X X

* Topics for examples are fruits and things in the sea.
 ** "X" means clap your hands.



Will you or won't you?)

D. Stress the verb at the end of short answers (Yes, I can. No, he doesn't.)

2. Choose 3 lines. Practice in 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2, 3 pattern. (e.g. I like your hat. Thank you. I like your hat. Thank you. I like your hat. Thank you. Thank you very much.)

(See Graham, 1992, for many more hints about writing your own chants.)

iv. To Practice TPR and Commands

Commands that you have taught through Total Physical Response can also be the basis of chants. Follow the same rules as for dialogs and:

1. Mix up the order of commands so they are unexpected.
2. Substitute new words occasionally.
3. Add humor when you can.

After doing playground commands, for example, we listen to, then join in on a chant (doing the actions at the same time, of course!). This one is an echo chant:

Play on the seesaw. Play on the seesaw.
 Up and down. Up and down.
 Up. Down. Up. Down.
 Swing on the swings. Swing on the swings.
 Back and forth. Back and forth.
 Back. Forth. Back. Forth.
 Slide down the slide. Slide down the slide.
 Slide! Slide! Slide! Slide!
 Wheeeeeeee! Wheeeeeeee!

Or, we sometimes do a call and response chant. This is one we do with animal names and the actions of animals.

The children do the actions as they answer the questions:

Can a lion fly? No!
 Can a lion jump? Yes!
 Can a bat swim? No!
 Can a bat fly? Yes!
 Can an elephant climb? No!
 Can an elephant swim? Yes!
 Can a gorilla fly? No!
 Can a gorilla climb? Yes!
 Can YOU fly? No!
 Can YOU climb? Yes!
 Can YOU jump? Yes!
 Can YOU swim? Yes!
 ALL RIGHT!

v. To Help Remember Sounds

English has many sounds that are new and different from the sounds of Japanese. We need to help our young learners hear these sounds and become aware of them. Rhythmic chants and songs are great for this, too. Just remember to use words the children already know when doing these sound awareness activities. Some tips:

1. Choose about 4 familiar vocabulary words that have the sound. It could be at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the words. Make sure to practice those sounds Japanese students have difficulty hearing.

Fig. 1: Grammar Songs (“2X” means sing the line two times)

Are You Sleeping? (Frère Jacques)	Do you like candy? (2X) Yes, I do. (2X) Do you have a notebook? (2X) No, I don't. (2X)
Auld Lang Syne	Whose keys are these? (3X) They're mine.
Clementine	What's she doing (3X) in the kitchen? She's eating (3X) her lunch. Where are the postcards? (2X) They're across from the mugs.
For He's a Jolly Good Fellow	Does he play soccer on Monday? (3X) Yes, yes, he does.
Have You Ever Seen a Lassie?	Have you ever gone to London? to London? to London? Have you ever gone to London? I went there last year.
Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes	Can you swim? Yes, I can. (2X)
If You're Happy and You Know it	Is it big? Is it big? Yes, it is. Are you ready everybody? Yes, we are. What are these, these, these? They're shoes.
Jimmy Crack Corn	Who's he? He's my father. Who's she? She's my mother.
La Cucaracha	Do you want pasta? (2X) Yes, I do. (2X) Is he a doctor? (2X) No, he's not. He's a nurse.
London Bridge	Where's the pen? It's on the book. (3X)
Mary Had a Little Lamb	What time is it? It's 8 o'clock. (3X) What time is it? It's 8 o'clock. Time to go to school.
Mulberry Bush	When do you play baseball? baseball? baseball? When do you play baseball? I play baseball on Monday
My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean	The paper is next to the ruler. The ruler is next to the book.
On Top of Old Smokey	What's this? It's a flower. What's that? It's a tree.
Skip to My Loo	Monday evening, ballet class. (3X) But I sleep late on Sunday!
The Farmer in the Dell	She can ride a bike. (2x) She can't play basketball. She can ride a bike.
Three Blind Mice	What does she want to do? She wants to have lunch.
Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star	What's this? It's a pencil. What's that? It's a book bag.

(For some ready-made grammar songs, see the textbooks in the reference list.)

2. Include both the sound alone and the words, e.g. “b b b What says b? b b book. b b baby”.

3. Use the same tune at different times with different sounds and words. Some tunes that work well are: “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”, “London Bridge”, “Jimmy Crack Corn”, and “Mary Had a Little Lamb”.

vi. To Introduce or Review a Grammar Point

As children grow up and start attending elementary school, music is still very important. Try setting the target structures in your textbook to familiar melodies. These “Grammar Songs” can be used to preview the structure before teaching it, or they can be used after teaching the structure for extra practice. The bonus is, the children go home singing the grammar lesson! Points to remember here are:

1. Use familiar melodies, matching the stress pattern of the song to the structure pattern.

2. Don’t forget the stress rules.

(See fig. 2 for examples of “Grammar Songs”)

vii. In the Background During Another Task

Even when children are doing quiet work at their desks, music is valuable. Research has shown that music can make the brain more receptive to learning. Brain function is increased when listening to music and it seems that music promotes more complex thinking. Music can help make connections between emotions, thinking, and learning (Woodall & Ziembrski, 2003).

Try playing a CD of some songs or chants that the children already know. You may find, as I have, that the children will spontaneously start to sing along quietly with the CD. Then, play some songs you plan to introduce at a later time. The children, of course, can’t sing along, but when you DO introduce them, they will seem to be old friends.

viii. At the End

Finally, use a song or chant to end and round off the lesson. Children leave on a high note, singing or chanting in English, and are more interested in coming back.

Guidelines for Doing Action Songs

Here are a few steps to follow to get the most out of your songs:

1. Play the CD or sing the song once or twice while the children just listen. They can begin to absorb the tune and the rhythm. Do the actions so they can see them.

2. Play or sing the song again and have them clap the rhythm and/or hum the tune. Do the actions.

3. Have them join in doing the actions with you.

4. Ask them if they can tell you what the song means from the actions. Explain anything they don’t understand.

5. Play the song again. The children join in with the actions, and sing along with the words if they wish (adapted from Phillips, 1994, p.101).

Conclusion

David Paul wrote, “Most children feel there is a barrier between the classroom world, and their world away from the classroom where they play with their friends and live their daily lives. If we want English to play a more central role in the children’s daily lives, we need to find ways to break down this barrier. When a child hums or sings one of our songs on the way home, it means we have succeeded.” (2003, p.58)

Using songs and chants in your English lessons helps to break down those barriers, gives lots of chances for extra practice, puts patterns and memories into children’s heads that will prepare them for future language learning, and is simply a lot of fun. What more can we ask for? And perhaps most reassuring of all for those teachers who feel they are low on music ability, children are not music critics! They appreciate whatever efforts we make. So if you haven’t sung a song or chanted a chant in your class recently, try one today. Your children can only benefit from your efforts.

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