

Musical Activities for Young Learners of EFL

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Introduction

It has been said that children have a natural musical taste and that play is the only activity that they take seriously. If this is so, teachers should not let song practice or any activity seem like work. They should keep it spontaneous. This has been shown to apply even to language teachers.

Acting on the idea that just as the selection of a particular tempo and beat in jazz may convey powerful and varied emotions, stress, and intonation pattern of the spoken language are essential elements for the expression of feelings and the intent of the speakers, Carolyn Graham designed Jazz Chants to teach the natural rhythm, stress and intonation patterns of conversational American English. Graham is not the only language teacher to recognize that music can be a wonderful medium for natural language learning, often called language acquisition.

Language teachers in Turkey, for example, have been using English language songs to help children improve their English through enjoyable activities. Readers who want to study related theoretical and research support can profit from examining the materials identified at the end of this article. I will present only some of the main supports as a rationale. But my main goal here is to share some songs and activities in the hope that more English language teachers around the world will use such enjoyable and effective means to enhance language learning and acquisition.

The Importance of Songs, Rhymes, Chants, and Musical Games

Songs, rhymes, chants, and musical games are fantastic materials for the language teacher to use with young learners. They have innumerable virtues. The following are the ones which I like best:

- Games/plays are an essential part of a curriculum, not a time filler or reward (Vale & Feunteun). Here I would add songs, too.
- Songs, rhymes, and chants are wonderful means of teaching stress and intonation patterns of English.
- Play and music are a source of motivation, interest and enjoyment.
- Parents should not become anxious if children say they have 'played' or 'sung' in the language class.
- Games, including musical ones, constitute a context for language use for children. They become themselves when they play or sing.
- Music and rhythm make it much easier to imitate and remember language than words which are just 'spoken'--if you teach children a song, it somehow 'sticks'.
- You can use a song or a chant to teach children the sounds and rhythm of English, to reinforce structures and vocabulary, or as Total Physical Response activities--but above all to have fun (Phillips).
- A song is a very strong means of triggering emotions that
 - contributes to socialization (a song is collective)
 - appeals to the ear (one listens to himself while singing)
 - engenders pleasure (reproduction of a sound, enjoyment of the rhythm)
 - helps to develop an aesthetic taste (expressing feelings and sentiments)
- Songs contain words and expressions of high frequency and offer repetition.
- Singing helps to acquire a sense of rhythm.
- It facilitates memorizing when it is associated with a linguistic item.

The children are motivated by the music, by the variety of rhythms, by the instrumentation (guitar, contrabass, percussions), by the different voices involved (Masculine, feminine, child, adult) and by the themes (boys/girls, circus, family, animals, etc.).

Finding and Using Musical Materials for Young Learners

To cut the long story short, if used properly by the teacher, plays and songs are excellent means whereby children have fun and at the same time acquire a language. Teachers often worry about where to find songs, chants, and rhymes. However, there is no great secret to turning ordinary language into chants. Children find it quite natural to turn almost anything into a chant. You can fit the words to any topic you are doing (Reilly & Ward). For example:

We're going to the beach (zoo, park, moon, etc.)
We're going to the beach
Hooray, hooray, hooray
We're going to the beach

You could even encourage the children to make up a little tune to these words if they want to, and to make up new chants of their own. Another alternative is to take a well-known tune and put your own words to it. For example, using the traditional French tune 'Frere Jacques' or a Turkish tune like 'Postaci'.

The following are several suggestions for ELT activities with young learners, including a choosing rhyme, a singing game, a chain dialogue, and two songs. All are well known in the United States. Applied linguists often propose very systematic and theoretically well-based techniques and activities to use with songs and rhymes. In my opinion such strict steps more often than not prove useless since songs vary so much in form, music, words, meaning, rhythm and level. Perhaps we could draw very broad guidelines. Let us listen to the following authentic American pieces and decide ourselves what activities we could do.

A. Eeny, Meeny, Miny Mo

Eeny meeny miny mo,
Catch a tiger by the toe.
If he hollers, make him pay
Fifty dollars every day.
My mother told me to
Choose the very best one.

B. Punchinello

What can you do, Punchinello funny fellow?
What can you do, Punchinello funny you?
2. You can do it, too ...
3. You choose one of us ...

C. Who Stole the Cookies from the Cookie Jar?

Group: Who stole the cookies from the cookie jar?
Jimmy stole the cookies from the cookie jar.
Jimmy: Who me?
Group: Yes, you!
Jimmy: Not me!
Group: Then who?
Jimmy: Linda stole the cookies from the cookie jar.
Linda: Who me?
Group: Yes you! (And so on).

D. London Bridge

London Bridge is falling down,
Falling down, falling down,
London Bridge is falling down,
My fair lady.

Chorus: (song after each verse)

Take the key and lock her up...

2. Build it up with iron bars
3. Iron bars will bend and break
4. Build it up with silver and gold.

E. Miss Lucy Had a Baby

Miss Lucy had a baby,
His name was Tiny Tim,
She put him in the bathtub
To see if he could swim.

He drank up all the water,
He ate up all the soap,
He tried to eat the bathtub,
But it wouldn't go down his throat.

Miss Lucy called the doctor,
Miss Lucy called the nurse,
Miss Lucy called the lady
With the alligator purse.

The Activities Based on the Above Rhymes and Songs

A. Eeny, Meeny, Miny Mo

The first song is a typical choosing rhyme. It is normally used to determine who is "it". In a group of children one child chants the rhyme while pointing to or touching the children one by one, including himself. The child pointed to last at the end of the rhyme is out. The same thing goes on till one child is left to be "it" (Beall et al.). Not what you say but what you do by saying that is important. So the if clause here does not express any condition. All the words and structures are used to choose rather than to mean something.

B. Punchinello

Children form a circle. One child is in center as "it". "It" makes a motion while children sing the first verse. Children copy "it"s motion during verse 2. "It" chooses another child to replace him and takes that person's place in the circle.

C. Who Stole the Cookies from the Cookie Jar?

The group of children form a circle. The teacher decides whose name will be called first (or we can use a choosing rhyme). The group asks the question and answers it with the given name. The person whose name is used refuses the accusation. The group insists. The person refuses once more. The group then asks who. The person gives the name of someone else in the group, and it goes on like that.

D. London Bridge

Two children join hands and form an arch. They secretly decide who is silver and who is gold. The other children form a single line to pass under the bridge. Children in line pass under the bridge. On 'My fair lady', the bridge falls and captures a prisoner. The bridge gently sways the prisoner back and forth. At the end of the chorus, the prisoner is secretly asked, 'Do you want to pay with silver or gold?' The prisoner then stands behind the child representing this choice. This goes on until all children have been captured. A tug-of-war between "gold" and "silver" ends the game.

E. Miss Lucy Had a Baby

1. Listen to the song and write the words in every line in the correct order.

Miss Lucy, baby, a, had
was, his, Tiny Tim, name
in, she, bathtub, him, the, put

could, if, to, he, swim, see

drank, he, water, up, all, the
up, soap, he, all, ate, the
to, bathtub, the, eat, he, tried
his, but, go, throat, it, down, wouldn't

called, Miss Lucy, doctor, the
Miss Lucy, nurse, the, called
lady, the, Miss Lucy, called
alligator, with, purse, the

2. Listen to the song and fill in the blanks. (One may leave out, say, all the verbs)

Miss Lucy a baby,
His name Tiny Tim,
She him in the bathtub
To if he could

He up all the water,
He up all the soap,
He to eat the bathtub,
But it down his throat.

Miss Lucy the doctor,
Miss Lucy the nurse,
Miss Lucy the lady,
With the alligator purse.

3. Listen to the song and put the lines in the correct order.

- His name was Tiny Tim,
- He ate up all the soap,
- With the alligator purse.
- He drank up all the water,
- Miss Lucy called the doctor,
- Miss Lucy had a baby,
- He tried to eat the bathtub,
- She put him in the bath tub
- Miss Lucy called the nurse,
- To see if he could swim.
- But it wouldn't go down his throat.
- Miss Lucy called the lady,

The Use of Musical Materials and Poetry with Comparatively Older Children

The following are some suggestions for teachers of older students at more advanced levels, using songs, musical games or rhymes (adapted from Dumont) though Phillips also proposes a somewhat similar framework for the teaching of songs.

1. Making the learners sensitive to the theme

This is the pre-presentation stage devoted to create interest on the part of the learners. This part could be done in the native language.

2. Listening to the song and presenting the gestures

The teacher has the children listen to the song while miming. He has to "act" the dialogue that is "said" in the song.

3. Spontaneous expression

After the students listen to the song several times, the teacher invites them to express their first reactions and impressions: their remarks on the language used, their feelings, etc.

4. **Hypotheses on the meaning**

The teacher encourages the children to formulate hypotheses on the general meaning of the text starting from their first impressions.

5. **Verification of the hypotheses**

While listening to the song once more, this time more systematically and with the support of the teacher's guidance, the learners are asked to verify their hypotheses.

6. **Phonological activities on pronunciation difficulties**

Sometimes certain parts of a song are difficult to hear because of the instrumentation, bad recording etc. Misunderstandings may result from interlingual or intralingual factors. In such cases the teacher steps in and devises remedial activities.

7. **Systematic teaching**

This component is composed of the following steps:

- First listening
- The repetition of the song by the teacher in the spoken form
- Repeating altogether
- Listening to the song from the cassette or CD
- The repetition of the song in the instrumental version

8. **Other activities**

Games, role play, exercises of oral discrimination, etc.

Conclusion

According to Krashen's input hypothesis, humans acquire language in only one way -- by understanding messages, or receiving 'comprehensible input'. So teaching activities should be designed in such a way as to supply the child with enjoyable and easy to understand input. As is clearly seen in the samples above, songs rhymes and games are wonderful materials in that respect. They are comprehensible, enjoyable, authentic and full of language we need in real life. They are part of our lives and they are around us. All we need do is share them with our students with a little planning before we enter the class.

Further Reading

For further reading concerning young learners one could consult the following sources:

- Christison, M. 1982. *English through Poetry*. Hayward, CA: Alemany (mainly about how to select and present poetry in ESL classes).
- Graham, C. 1978. *Jazz Chants for Children*. New York: Oxford University Press (collection of chants that teachers can use with adolescent and adult beginners).
- Graham, C. 1986. *Small Talk*. New York: Oxford University Press (chants for teaching language functions like greetings, introductions, saying goodbye, talking about weather, etc. available on cassettes).
- Hagege, C. 1996. *L'enfant aux Deux Langues*. Paris: Editions Odile Jacob (a scholarly explanation of how to introduce a foreign language to young children).
- Hammond, L. 1990. *Five Furry Teddy Bears*. Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin (contemporary action rhymes, finger plays, songs and games, with music and drawings).
- Kind, U. 1980. *Tune in to English: Learning English through Familiar Melodies*. New York: Regents (familiar tunes are used to teach functions in English).
- Matterson, E. M. (ed.). 1991. *This Little Puffin*. Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin (action songs, finger plays, rhymes, etc. with music and illustrations of movements).
- Mother Goose. 1991. London: Walker Books (traditional nursery rhymes).
- Osman, A., & McConochie, J. 1979. *If You Feel Like Singing*. White Plains, NY: Longman (old favorite songs followed by activities like crossword puzzles, word searches, cloze exercises and matching words).
- Palmer, H. 1971. *Songbook: Learning Basic Skills through Music I*. Freeport, New York: Educational Activities (songs to teach topics like body parts, animals, colors, numbers, clothes and the alphabet).
- Reilly, V. & S. M. Ward. 1997. *Very Young Learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (activities including games, songs, drama, stories, arts and crafts and some photocopiable flashcards).
- Silverstein, S. 1991. *A Light in the Attic*. New York: Harper & Row (humorous poems with unexpected twists for students of

all ages; cassette available.)

- The Random House Book Of Poetry for Children. 1983. New York: Random House (poems appropriate to use with ESL students; though meant for children, the poems would be enjoyed by older students, too.)

Cassettes

The following cassettes can be used with young learners in many creative ways:

- Byrne, J. & A. Waugh. 1981. Jingle Bells. Oxford: Oxford University Press (song book and cassette of traditional songs).
- Hop, Skip, and Jump. Early Learning Center. (22 action songs with words and instructions.) (Address: South Marston Park, Swindon SN3 4TJ, U.K.)
- Super Songs. 1997. Oxford: OUP. (cassette and book of 27 traditional songs especially for young children)
- Williams, S. & I. Beck. 1983. Round and Round the Garden. Oxford University Press. (cassette and book of finger plays and rhymes for young children, with music and illustration.)

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- Argondizzo, C. 1992. Children in Action. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Brumfit, C. Et al (ed.). 1995. Teaching English to Children. Edinburgh: Longman.
- Dumont, P. 1998. Le FranÁais par la Chanson. Paris: L2Harmatton.
- Gloton, R. & C. Clero. 1971. L'ActivitÈ CrÈatrice chez l'Enfant. Casterman. Biblioteque National du QuÈbec.
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- Grundy, P. 1995. Beginners. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Hagege, C. 1996. L'enfant aux Deux Langues. Paris: Editions Odile Jacob.
- Holden, S. (ed.) 1989. Teaching Children. Hong Kong: Modern English Publications LTD.
- Keskil, G. 1996. A Bit of Everything. Istanbul: Surat English Language Teaching.
- Krashen, S. D. 1982. Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Krashen, S. D. 1985. The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications. London & New York: Longman.
- Osman A., & McConochie, J. 1979. If You Feel Like Singing. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Reilly, V. & Sheila M. W. 1997. Very Young Learners. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Richard-Amato, P. A. 1998. Making It Happen. New York: Longman.
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