



## Using Songs Effectively to Teach English to Young Learners

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**Abstract:** *Songs play an important role in the development of young children learning a second language. A testament to this is the frequency with which songs are used in English Language Teaching classrooms all over the world. This paper begins by looking at why songs can be considered valuable pedagogical tools. In particular, it will discuss how songs can help learners improve their listening skills and pronunciation, and how they can be useful in the teaching of vocabulary and sentence structures. The author will also discuss how songs can reflect culture and increase students' overall enjoyment of learning a second language. The author will then attempt to show, through practical examples, how songs can be used as language tasks. Finally, the paper aims to explore how classic songs for children can be adapted to suit a particular theme or part of the curriculum a teacher might wish to teach.*

**Key words:** *songs as pedagogical tools, classroom routine, listening, speaking, vocabulary.*

Most children enjoy singing songs, and they can often be a welcome change from the routine of learning a foreign language. For the teacher, using songs in the classroom can also be a nice break from following a set curriculum. Songs can be taught to any number of students and even those teachers with the most limited resources can use them effectively. Songs can play an important role in the development of language in young children learning a second language. Yet songs may be used relatively ineffectively and the potential for language learning is not maximized. This paper starts by analyzing why songs should be considered as useful pedagogical tools. The author then proposes using songs as language learning tasks to maximize the benefits of using songs and attempts to show how this might be done using practical examples. Finally, the paper explores how classic children's songs could be modified to help teachers use them more frequently to teach a wider variety of topics.

**Songs as Pedagogical Tools.** One advantage of using songs in the young learner classroom is their flexibility. Songs can be used for a number of purposes and there are many reasons why songs can be considered a valuable pedagogical tool. Songs can help young learners improve their listening skills and pronunciation, therefore potentially helping them to improve their speaking skills. Songs can also be useful tools in the learning of vocabulary, sentence structures, and sentence patterns, not to mention their reflectivity of mother tongue culture. Perhaps the greatest benefit to using songs in the classroom is that they can be fun.<sup>1</sup> Pleasure for its own sake is an important part of learning a language, something which is often overlooked by teachers, and songs can add interest to the classroom routine and potentially improve student motivation.

**Listening.** Purcell states that students can become bored by repeatedly listening to a narration or dialog as they attempt to understand the meaning of new words or phrases in context. In contrast, listening to a song over and over again can seem less monotonous because of the rhythm and melody. Some songs, such as Hello, contain common expressions and can be used as good

<sup>1</sup> Cameron, L. The task as a unit for teacher development. 2001.p. 345-351.



listening activities. For example, the teacher could sing the first three lines of the song below, and students could respond with the following three lines.

Hello,

Hello,

Hello, how are you?

I'm fine,

I'm fine,

I hope that you are, too.

Songs can also help to improve listening skills because they provide students with practice listening to different forms of intonation and rhythm. English has a stress-timed rhythm, for which songs can help to establish a feeling. Murphey believes that music has the power to engrave itself into our brains, stating that "songs work on our short- and long-term memory" and are therefore adequate tools for using in the language classroom.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking. Children are often keen to learn how to make new sounds and this can take a great deal of practice. Some teachers use minimal-pair drills, yet these types of activities are rarely interesting for young learners. Songs, on the other hand, can allow young learners to practice a new sound without producing the same level of boredom. Songs also have a natural rhythm with a recurring beat that is similar to the stress patterns of spoken English. These patterns make some songs useful for practicing rhythm and stress. The song *Girls and Boys Come Out and Play* could be used effectively to teach English rhythm and stress.

Girls and boys come out to play,

The sun above is bright today.

Leave your work and leave your sleep,

Come and join us in the street.

Come with a shout and come with a call,

Come with a smile and bring your ball.

Down the steps and up the path,

All the fun will make you laugh.

Vocabulary. Songs can provide the opportunity for vocabulary practice. They are usually based around a theme or topic that can provide the context for vocabulary learning. The song "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" for example, could be used to review body parts, or the song "I Can Sing a Rainbow" might be useful for reviewing color names. Most children's songs are characterized by monosyllabic words, many of which are frequently repeated. This repetition offers greater exposure to these words and can help to improve vocabulary acquisition. Some of the vocabulary and language used in traditional and popular English songs, however, can cause difficulties for language learners due to their use of low frequency and archaic words. The song and the lyrics need to be selected carefully to complement the target vocabulary. A difficulty for teachers is finding and selecting songs that are suitable both in terms of vocabulary and topic or theme.

To sum up the first purpose in presenting this paper is to state a case for developing songs from activities into language learning tasks. The second purpose is to highlight how, with a little



initiative, teachers can adapt children's songs to better suit their teaching goals. Songs can be used as a valuable teaching and learning tool. Using songs can help learners improve their listening skills and pronunciation; they can also be useful for teaching vocabulary and sentence structures. Probably the greatest benefit to using songs in the classroom is that they are enjoyable. Unfortunately, despite these advantages, simply singing songs will not teach learners how to communicate in another language. Using songs as tasks might be one way of helping transfer words from songs into use, and maximize the potential of songs as teaching and learning tools. Adapting existing children's songs is one method that teachers can use to increase their repertoire of songs, thus giving them more opportunity to use songs in their teaching contexts.

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