

7 Songs and chants

Music and rhythm are an essential part of language learning for young learners. Children really enjoy learning and singing songs, and older learners find working with current or well-known pop songs highly motivating.

We have all experienced songs which we just can't get out of our heads. 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'.

A chant is like a song without music, or a poem with a very marked rhythm. There are many different songs and chants, from traditional ones to specially written material for young language learners. Traditional songs and chants often contain obscure or out-of-date language which may outweigh their usefulness, but they do have the advantage of being part of English-speaking culture.

Some songs are good for singing, others for doing actions to the music, and the best ones are good for both! You can use songs and chants 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.

You can use a song or a chant at any stage in a lesson: for example, at the beginning to mark the change from the previous subject to English; in the middle of a lesson as a break from another, more concentrated activity; or at the end, to round a lesson off. Songs and chants can also help to create a sense of group identity.

Pop songs are usually best used in listening activities. You need to select the song you use with care. Is the language too difficult? Can you hear the words? Is the subject-matter suitable? Older children enjoy working with popular songs so much that they are willing to tackle difficult language, and will often sing along when the song is played.

You can also use songs as background music while the children are working quietly on another task—it is surprising how much they absorb unconsciously.

This chapter contains a very small selection of songs and chants to use in class. Some sources of more songs are listed in the Further Reading section. Another useful book is *Music and Song* in this series, which has a section on young learners, and a very comprehensive bibliography.

YOUNG LEARNERS

Sarah Phillips

7.1 Action songs

All

A, B

10–20 minutes

Linguistic: to associate actions with words, to internalize the sounds and rhythms of English.

Other: to develop a sense of rhythm, to enjoy the music, to give the children a chance to 'let off steam'.

The children do actions as they listen to and sing songs.

Song cassette and cassette player, or music and a musical instrument.

Listen to the song and practise doing the actions yourself.

These are some general guidelines for doing action songs in class.

- 1 Play or sing the song once or twice with the children just listening, so that they begin to absorb the tune and rhythm.
- 2 Now play or sing the song again and get them to clap the rhythm and/or hum the tune to the music.
- 3 Get them to join in 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.

You can give older children the words of the song, perhaps with gaps to fill in, or to illustrate.

It is a good idea to get the children to make an ongoing song book to which they add new songs as they learn them.

- 1 Listening and doing actions is the best way to exploit traditional songs where the words are often difficult to understand. The actions keep the children interested and give them a reason for listening.
- 2 The children may well want to sing the words too. This is fine if they want to, but do not force them if they are not ready.

EXAMPLES

Parts of the body

Head and shoulders, knees and toes (traditional)

Actions: the children touch the parts of the body in the song.

The Hokey Cokey (traditional)

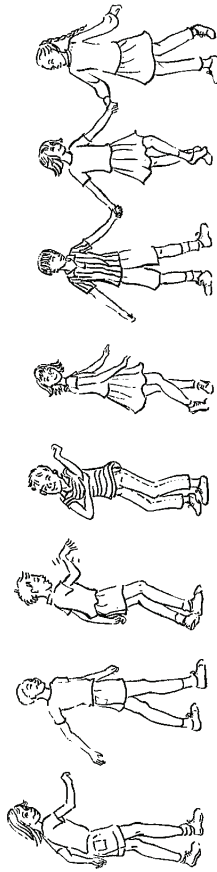
The children stand in a big circle.

Words

You put your *right hand in
Your *right hand out
In, out, in, out
Shake it all about
You do the hokey cokey
And you turn around
That's what it's all about.

Actions

Everyone puts their right hand into the circle
Everyone puts their right hand out of the circle
Everyone puts their right hand in and out
Everyone shakes their right hand vigorously
Everyone holds their elbows and moves their hips to the music
Everyone turns round on the spot
Everyone holds hands

**Chorus**

Oh, the hokey cokey
Oh, the hokey cokey
Oh, the hokey cokey
Knees bend, arms stretch,
clap your hands.

The whole circle moves into the centre
The whole circle moves out again
Everyone lets go of one another's hands
Do these actions.

*In other verses, substitute left hand, right leg, left leg, whole self (or other parts of the body). It is best not to let it go on too long, however.

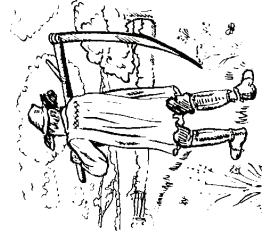
Here we go round the mulberry bush (traditional)

Chorus

Here we go round the mulberry bush
The mulberry bush, the mulberry bush
Here we go round the mulberry bush
On a cold and frosty morning.

Verse 1

This is the way we *clean our teeth
*Clean our teeth, clean our teeth
This is the way we *clean our teeth
On a cold and frosty morning.



One man and his dog, Woof, woof, Went to mow a mea-dow.

Repeat chorus.

* In other verses, substitute 'wash our face', 'brush our hair', 'put on our clothes', 'eat our breakfast', and so on.

Actions: In the chorus the children stand in a big circle holding hands and skip round in time to the music.
In the verses they mime the actions.

Counting songs

Ten little fingers (from *Wee Sing*)

One little, two little, three little fingers
Four little, five little, six little fingers
Seven little, eight little, nine little fingers
Ten fingers on my hands.
Ten little, nine little, eight little fingers
Seven little, six little, five little fingers
Four little, three little, two little fingers
One finger on my hands.

Actions: The children show the correct number of fingers as they listen to the song.

One man went to mow (traditional)

Words

One man went to mow

Went to mow a meadow

One man and his dog

Woof, woof

Went to mow a meadow.

Actions

Hold up one finger, then make a moving motion

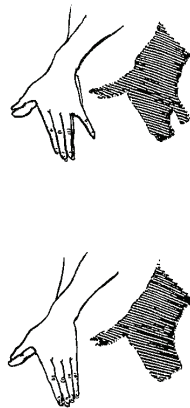
(as if cutting grass with a scythe)

Repeat the moving motion

Hold up one finger and then make a dog's head with your hand

Open your fingers in time to the 'woof, woof'

Make a moving motion



Two men went to mow

Went to mow a meadow

Two men, one man and his dog

Woof, woof

Went to mow a meadow.

And so on until:

Ten men went to mow

Went to mow a meadow

Ten men, nine men, eight men, seven men, six men, five men, four men, three men, two men, one man and his dog

Woof, woof

Went to mow a meadow.

VARIATIONS

Put in more appropriate words for your children, for example:

One boy/girl went to see, went to see a friend

or

One boy/girl went to ride, went to ride his/her bike.

Spelling songs

Bingo (traditional)

Before singing the song, practise the letters and claps. Write 'BINGO' on the board, and teach the children to chant the letters. Now rub one letter out. Get the children to clap the missing letter and spell the rest of the word, keeping to the same rhythm. Continue like this until this until they are only clapping.

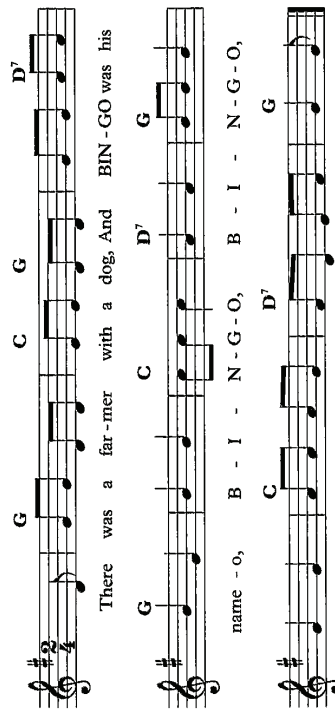
First time: B I N G O

Second time: clap I N G O

Third time: clap clap N G O

And so on until: clap clap clap G O

Last time: clap clap clap clap



There was a far-mer with a dog, And BIN-GO was his

name - o, B - I - N - G - O, B - I - N - G - O,

B - I - N - G - O, And BIN-GO was his name - o.

There was a farmer with a dog
And BINGO was his name-o

B-I-N-G-O clap-I-N-G-O

B-I-N-G-O clap-I-N-G-O

B-I-N-G-O clap-I-N-G-O

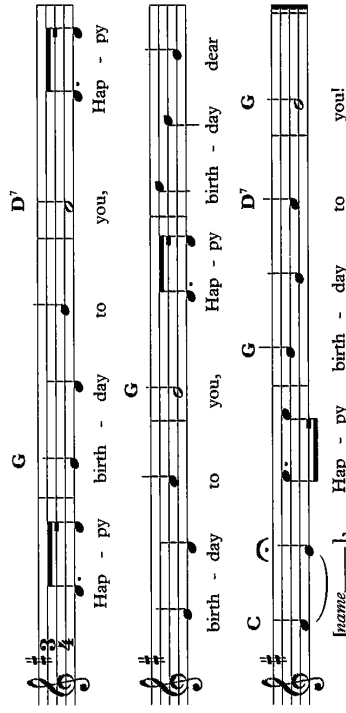
And BINGO was his name-o.

Continue until the children are just clapping the letters of 'Bingo'.

Once the children know the words and the tune, you can substitute their names for 'Bingo'.

Songs for special occasions

Happy birthday (traditional)



Hap - py birth - day to you, Hap - py

birth - day to you, Hap - py birth - day dear

[name], Hap - py birth - day to you!

Happy birthday to you

Happy birthday to you

Happy birthday dear (name of the child)

Happy birthday to you!

Actions: The children sing and clap in time to the music. At the end of the song they do one clap for each year of the age of the birthday child.

Another way is to sing the song three times, starting very quietly and getting louder on each verse.

We wish you a Merry Christmas (traditional; adapted)

Three staves of musical notation for the song "We wish you a Mer-ry Christ-mas, We wish you a Mer-ry Christ-mas, And a Happy New Year." The first staff is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The second staff is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The third staff is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Chord symbols G, G, D7, C, and D7 are placed above the notes.

Chorus

**We wish you a Merry Christmas
We wish you a Merry Christmas
We wish you a Merry Christmas
And a Happy New Year.**

Let's all do a little *clapping
Let's all do a little *clapping
We wish you a Merry Christmas
And a Happy New Year.

Repeat chorus.

*Substitute stamping, waving, and so on in successive verses.

Actions: In the chorus the children form a 'snake' by holding onto one another's waists, and dance around the room, perhaps waving one hand.

In the verses the snake breaks up and the children clap (or stamp, or wave, etc.) in time to the music.

Ten little witches

This adaptation of 'Ten little fingers' (see above) can be sung at Hallowe'en.



Change 'fingers' to 'witches' and 'on my hands' to 'in the sky'. Give each child a number (from one to ten) and get them to squat in a row. When they hear their number they should stand up, and then when they hear it again they should squat down again. You could also make witches' hats for them to wear.

7.2 Poems, rhymes, and chants to say

LEVEL	All
AGE GROUP	All
TIME	10–20 minutes
AIMS	Linguistic: to practise the sounds, rhythms, and stress patterns of English, and in some cases to practise a structure. Other: to have fun, to feel a sense of achievement.
DESCRIPTION	The children learn and recite a poem, rhyme, or chant and, in some cases, do the actions to the words.
MATERIALS	Copies of the words (optional).
PREPARATION	Learn the poem yourself and practise saying it with a good beat. Add any actions you think are appropriate.
IN CLASS	These are some general guidelines for teaching a poem. Changes

These are some general guidelines for teaching a poem, rhyme, or chant. You would probably not do them all in one lesson!

- 1 Say the poem yourself, and demonstrate the actions.
- 2 See if the children can guess what it means.
- 3 Practise saying it with all the class, keeping up a good rhythm and listening out for pronunciation problems.
- 4 Teach the children the actions and get them to do them as you say the poem. It is not important if they do not all say the words at this stage.

5 (Optional) Write all or some of the poem on the board and explain any difficult words, or even translate it if you think necessary.

6 (Optional) Ask the children to look at the words on the board again, and rub out one or two words (you could substitute pictures). Get them to recite the poem, ‘reading’ the invisible words. Then rub out some more words and get them to recite it again. Go on like this until they are ‘reading’ the invisible poem.

7 The children say the words and do the actions.

FOLLOW-UP 1

As with songs, you can give the children the words to illustrate and get them to make a little book.

FOLLOW-UP 2

Get the children to change words in the poem, rhyme, or chant to make their own versions (see 'In a dark, dark wood' and 'A sailor went to sea', below). See also 4.5 and 4.6 for more ideas on how to get children to write their own poems in English.

COMMENTS

The best rhymes for language learning are repetitive ones in which just a few words change from verse to verse. Carolyn Graham's books on Jazz Chants are an excellent source of material. You will find more examples in the Further Reading section.

EXAMPLES

Five little elephants (adapted from Of Frogs and Snails)

Words

● ● ● ● ●

Five little elephants

● ● ● ● ●

Standing in a row

● ● ● ● ●

Five little trunks

● ● ● ● ●

Waving hello

● ● ● ● ●

'Oh' said an elephant

● ● ● ● ●

'Time to go'

● ● ● ● ●

Four little elephants

● ● ● ● ●

Standing in a row.

Continue with:

Four little elephants

Three little elephants

Two little elephants

And so on until

One little elephant

Standing in a row

One little trunk
Waving hello
'Oh' said the elephant
'Time to go!'
No little elephants
Standing in a row.

The Train

This chant should be said to the rhythm of a steam train moving off slowly, gathering speed, and finally entering a tunnel with a whistle. The stress on the words is vital, and is marked above each one.

● ● ● ● ●

Coffee, coffee

● ● ● ● ●

Milk and sugar, milk and sugar

● ● ● ● ●

Strawberries and cream, strawberries and cream

● ● ● ● ●

Chocolate cake and chocolate biscuits

● ● ● ● ●

Chocolate cake and chocolate biscuits

● ● ● ● ●

Fish and chips

● ● ● ● ●

Fish and chips

● ● ● ● ●

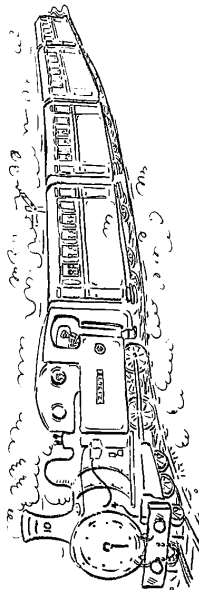
Fish and chips

● ● ● ● ●

SOUP

● ● ● ● ●

S-O-O-O-U-P



COMMENTS

1 As long as you keep the same rhythm, you can adapt this chant to whatever food your children usually eat.

2 It is important that 'strawberries' and 'chocolate' are pronounced as two syllables (i.e. with the first *e* and the second *o* silent) in this chant.

In a dark, dark wood (traditional)

• • • • •
In a dark, dark wood there's a dark, dark house
• • • • •
In the dark, dark house there's a dark, dark cupboard
• • • • •
In the dark, dark cupboard there's a dark, dark shelf
• • • • •
On the dark, dark shelf there's a dark, dark box
• • • • •
And in the dark, dark box there's a ...

VARIATIONS

This poem can easily be changed by you or the children, for example:

In a big, big wood, there's a big, big castle
In the big, big castle there's a big, big room
In the big, big room, there's a big, big chest
In the big, big chest, there's a big, big key
The big, big key opens a big, big door
And behind the big, big door, there's a ...

FOLLOW-UP

Once the children have learned the poem they can illustrate it and imagine what's in the box.

A sailor went to sea (a traditional clapping rhyme)

• • • • •
A sailor went to sea, sea, sea
• • • • •
To see what he could see, see, see
• • • • •
But all that he could see, see, see
• • • • •
Was the bottom of the deep blue sea, sea, sea.

Actions: The children stand in pairs facing each other and clap in time to the rhythm marked above the words. The claps go like this:

- First beat: clap your own hands
- Second beat: clap your partner's right hand
- Third beat: clap your own hands
- Fourth beat: clap your partner's left hand
- Fifth beat: clap your own hands
- Sixth, seventh, and eighth beats: clap both your partner's hands three times (your right against his/her left and your left against his/her right).

VARIATIONS

You or the children can adapt this rhyme, though of course it is difficult to imitate the play on words. However, two or three rhyming couplets are just as good as long as you keep the same rhythm, for example:

My brother went to play, play, play
With his friends one day, day, day
They all went to the park, park, park
And stayed there until dark, dark, dark.

7.3 Exploiting songs

LEVEL	All
AGE GROUP	All
TIME	20–30 minutes
AIMS	Linguistic: to practise listening skills, vocabulary, and in some cases a language point. Other: to enjoy the music; to introduce the children to aspects of English-speaking culture.
DESCRIPTION	Some ways of using songs in class: either songs specially written for learners, or songs written for native speakers.
MATERIALS	Cassettes and a cassette player; see individual activities.

Find the word

A very simple introductory activity to a song is to ask the children to listen for a certain word, and note down the number of times it occurs. For example, in the song 'Hello, goodbye' by the Beatles, you can ask the children to count the number of times they hear 'hello' and 'goodbye'.

More advanced learners can note down words with certain sounds in the song—for example, if your children have difficulty in hearing the difference between /i:/ and /I/, you could ask them to write down words containing /i:/.

Song pictures 1

- 1 Choose a song which has a strong descriptive text. Find or draw a picture which illustrates it, but with some gaps or mistakes. Make copies for the children.
- 2 Give the children the copies of the picture. Ask them to listen to the song and complete or correct the picture.

Song pictures 2

You can use this technique with a song that tells a story.

- 1 Draw simple pictures to illustrate the story, cut them out, and make a worksheet with the pictures out of order.
- 2 Ask the children to listen to the song and put the pictures in order.

Gap fill songs

Choose a song which has clear words. Use any of the activities in 4.1, 'Variations on a gap'.

Mixed-up lines

- 1 Copy out the words of the song. Stick them onto card and cut them out. Mix up the order of the lines.
- 2 Ask the children to listen to the song and put the lines in the correct order.

This is especially effective with pop songs.

With a long song it is better to cut it into verses.

Song translations

- 1 Translate the song line by line into the children's native language, then mix up the lines.
- 2 Make copies and give the children one each, with a copy of the English words. Put them in pairs and ask them to match the lines.

COMMENTS

Many English pop songs are well known, even to the youngest learners, especially the theme songs to films or television series. Although the language is difficult, children will love using them in class. You could probably use at least two of the activities here in order to get the most out of each song.