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# Using Rhythm in Language Arts to Improve Language Learning and Motivation

Workshop for MELTA 2013, Johor Bharu, Malaysia



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## **Abstract**

Everybody *needs* rhythm – our very lives are sustained by the internal rhythms which we rely on. Everybody *loves* rhythm, and we all respond to rhythmic sounds or sensations that for one reason or another have become familiar or nostalgic to us. Young children quickly learn to appreciate rhythms whether in the songs their mother hums to them, the rhythmic patting and swaying that sends them to sleep, or simply the sound of a parent's approaching steps.

Learning something which is rhythmic provides more enjoyment for young (and older) students, as well as making it easier for them to remember their lessons. The teacher's passion for the subject matter is readily transmitted through rhythmic activities, infecting even the most reluctant student with an eagerness to join in. According to research, students with various learning limitations and behaviour difficulties are often hampered in their learning by a lack of ability in rhythm and they need the teacher's patient guidance in this area even more.

However not all teachers are confident when it comes to sharing and teaching rhythm, often feeling that they "can't sing", they can't really keep a beat or move rhythmically, and maybe their pronunciation of English doesn't always feel as natural as they would like.

This workshop is designed to provide practical ideas for teaching Language Arts in primary school with confidence and enthusiasm, imparting rhythm and inspiration to every student in your class.



## Songs and Poems

Here are a number of songs and poems that can be used to improve English Language Learning and Motivation.

### **Pass the Beat (*maybe*)**

This is a circle activity for a group or class. It is great for encouraging socialisation, developing control, improving a sense of rhythm ... as well as having great possibilities for language practice and a great deal of fun if handled well.

#### *Instructions:*

Sit in a circle.

(Maybe try passing an object around the circle, to make sure the concept is understood.)

Demonstrate hand-clapping to a regular beat, and hand-clapping irregularly. Explain that as a group you are going to create a regular beat. You are going to "Pass the Beat" around the circle, with each child providing one beat / clap.

Teacher does the first clap, and the next child claps once, and then so on around the circle.

Discuss how well it went. Try again going around the other way.

#### **Try other styles:**

- Get faster / slower as you go around.
- Each child claps twice, but keep the beat even. (3 times, 4 times)
- One child claps, and the next child claps twice quickly creating a rhythm.
- Every second (or 3rd or 4th ...) child claps (once, or twice or ...)
- Close their eyes and see if they can take their turn at clapping at the right time.
- Claps get louder / softer as they go around the circle.
- Add other body percussion - clicks / knee-slaps.
- Try a "Mexican Wave" or other movement - each child in turn makes the movement.
- Get them to clap hands with the child on one side, then the child on the other, thus passing the clap around.
- Use words - pass a word around, or a word sequence (count, go through alphabet, days of the week, or just alternate with two words ...) There are endless possibilities ...

This can become a regular activity at the beginning and/or end of a lesson to revise / practice some part of the work. It has the effect of calming and focusing the group.



### **Fruit Salad (*maybe*)**

This is essentially a Vocabulary Chant, with some added words and expressions. There are many ways to use and adapt it. Each 'verse' can have exaggerated intonation and stress, as well as body percussion and/or movement. The sections in brackets could be whispered, or have special added movements. The verses/lines can be spoken separately, or one after another, or overlapping, or added one by one to build up and then removed progressively one by one. It can even be spoken as a 'round' – see the next song.

The whole class could be in groups with one verse each, or a group could develop a performance of the whole piece in a sequence they develop within the group.

And, of course, new words could be written by the teacher and/or students.

### **"Fruit Salad"**

Apples, peaches, pears and plums!  
Apples, peaches, pears and plums!

Banana-na-na-na-na-na!  
Banana-na-na-na-na-na!

Grapes, grapes, doo-ah doo-ah!  
Grapes, grapes, doo-ah doo-ah!

Papaya, papaya, p-p-papaya!  
Papaya, papaya, p-p-papaya!

Watermelon, watermelon, (*spit out seed, spit out seed*)  
Watermelon, watermelon, (*spit out seed, spit out seed*)

Raspberry, raspberry, (*raspberry, raspberry, raspberry*)  
Raspberry, raspberry, (*raspberry, raspberry, raspberry*)



### **Row, Row, Row Your Boat**

This song is one of a special type that can be sung as a round. It's very possible that your students already know the song, but may have never sung it this way.

Row, row, row your boat

Gently down the stream.

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,

Life is but a dream.

1. First of all sing the song right through together to give everyone an idea of pitch and speed and (hopefully) a feel for the rhythm and beat.

2. Then ask one half of the class to start singing, and keep on singing to the end of the song. Tell them to sing the song through twice.

When they get to "Merrily" lead the other half of the class to start singing from the beginning of the song and also sing through twice.

3. Split the class into four groups. The first group starts singing, and the second group starts singing on "Gently". The third group comes in when the second group starts on "Gently" and so on.

Singing songs this way builds the students' sense of rhythm and strengthens their inner hearing as they concentrate on their own part while enjoying the totality of the sound.

Another verse for fun:

Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream.

If you see a crocodile, don't forget to scream!

Some other well-known songs that can be sung as a round:

- Are you sleeping? (Frere Jacques)
- Baa, Baa black sheep
- London's Burning
- Three Blind Mice
- Hickory, Dickory, Dock
- Kookaburra laugh



### **Alive Alert Awake**

This is a good song for livening up a class at the beginning of a lesson, or even when they are beginning to look floppy half-way through a session.

*(to the tune of "If You're Happy and You Know It")*

I'm alive, alert, awake, enthusiastic!

I'm alive, alert, awake, enthusiastic!

I'm alive, alert, awake,

I'm awake, alert, alive,

I'm alive, alert, awake, enthusiastic!

#### Actions:

**Alive:** hands on your head

**Alert:** hands on shoulders

**Awake:** cross arms over chest

**Enthu-:** hands on thighs

**-si-:** clap

**-astic:** snap with both hands

Repeat the song a number of times, getting faster as you go!

*[Second verse to the song:*

I am dead to the world and very sleepy ...

I am dead to the world and the world is dead to me

I am dead to the world and very sleepy.]

#### **An important note about pronunciation:**

When sung with the BM-style pronunciation it says this:

I ala, aler, awa, en-tu-si-asti ...

(Also notice that it *should* be "en-thu-si-as-tic".)

Now that is not going to help our little Malaysian darlings to speak English clearly, is it?

#### **The SOLUTION!**

It's true that native speakers of English don't *always* pronounce the final consonant clearly either, BUT if the next word starts with a vowel, then the consonant is stuck in front of it. So our song is pronounced like this:

I' **m**-ali **v**-aler **t**-awa **k**-en-thu-si-a-**stick**

We still need to make the effort to put the final /k/ on enthusiastic.



## **Elephant in the Attic (*maybe*)**

This is a fun chant with actions, and children enjoy the mental image of the elephant on a bicycle. Teach the words and actions line by line until they know it. And then start removing the words – leaving only actions – one line at a time, repeating the rest of the lines each time. Finally do the whole story with actions only.

Make sure you explain (with actions, pictures, or using English words they are already familiar with – not using BM) the meaning of words they may not know such as attic, cycling, chic, elegant and behind.

The educational purpose of this type of activity is to strengthen the children's 'inner hearing', they should be still hearing the words – and be aware of the rhythm – when they are just doing the actions.

What is that noise (*cup hand to ear*)

Up in the attic (*point over your head*)

It is an elephant (*make a trunk with your arm*)

Cycling round and round. (*cycling motion with legs*)

It is an elephant (*make a trunk with your arm*)

All chic and elegant (*fashion model pose*)

With one tail here (*make trunk with your arm*)

And one behind. (*point to where your tail would be if you had one!*)





## **Hello My Name is Joe (*maybe*)**

This little chant has a fun conversational style that can involve using lots of intonation mixed with giggles as children struggle to concentrate on their button-pressing. It can be said in unison, or in groups or pairs.

Hello, my name is Joe  
I have a wife and a dog and a family  
I work **all day** in the button factory  
One day, my boss came up to me and said,  
"Hey Joe, are you busy?"  
I said, "No ... no!"  
"Then do this..."

**Actions:** *At the end of the first verse, pretend you're punching a button with your right hand's index finger. Then repeat the chant, adding your left index finger. Then one foot, then both feet, then your head are added.*

*Final verse (while punching a button with a finger on each hand, each foot, and your head):*

Hello, my name is Joe  
I have a wife and a dog and a family  
I work **all day** in the button factory  
One day, my boss came up to me and said,  
"Hey Joe, are you busy?"  
I said, "YES!!"

*... And collapse as if exhausted.*

As well as giving practice in intonation while having fun, the concentration required to perform the task of telling the story while pressing the buttons strengthens the children's skills in rhythm.



## I Left My...

Marching practice is great for concentration and coordination and encourages an awareness of beat and rhythm - as well as knowing which foot is which!

Tell the students that when they say the word 'left' they should be stepping on the left foot, and when they say 'right' they should be on their right foot.

The first one is simple. Practice it a couple of times.

L		R		L		R
I had a good home and I left						
L		R		L		R
I had a good home and I left						
L		R		L		R
I left on my own and it served me right,						
L	R	L	R			
Left, right, left, right.						

Left, left, left, right, left  
 I left my wife in Argentina  
 With 52 kids and a laughing hyena  
 I thought I was right, right,  
 Right in my country and whoop-de-doo!  
 Left, left! I left my wife...

This one is a little more complicated. Firstly they should note that in the first line "left, left" does not indicate hopping on one foot, but rather there is a pause for the right foot in between. The same applies later when the chant says "right, right".

And then when we get to "whoop-dee-doo" we are on the wrong foot to start the next line so we do a little jig to swap feet.

L	R	L	R
Left, left,			
L	R	L	R
I left my wife in New Orleans			
L	R	L	R
With thirty-five cents and a can of beans			
L	R	L	R
I thought it was right, right,			
R	L	R	L
Right for my country whoop-dee-doo!			
L	R	L	R
Left, left... (start again)			



## **Jazz Chant – Vocabulary**

A vocabulary chant is the simplest to create. In the context of Grammar learning, this may involve learning a group of words that are all a particular type – such as adjectives – or it may involve a selection of grammar terms – such as past, present, future.

With a partner, create a vocabulary chant using the following steps.

- Decide on your topic or theme (e.g. grammar terms, nouns with a theme such as animals, verbs of speaking, adverbs ... anything really)
- Brainstorm words that fit your topic or theme. Write 10 or 15.
- Next to each word, note how many syllables it has.
- Now choose 3 words with 2, 2, 3, and 1 syllable respectively.
- Now write your chant.

\* When you say your chant, keep a strong 4-beat rhythm by putting one beat on each word and then adding a \*click at the end of the 1st 2nd and last lines.



## **Jazz Chant – Grammar Chant**

A Grammar chant usually consists of a series of phrases, sentences, or grammar rules which are called out by the teacher and simply repeated by the students.

The first time you teach a new chant, you can make it simply an Echo Chant, for example:

### **Write! Write!**

*Teacher:* Write! Write!

*Students:* Write! Write!

*Teacher:* Who writes?

*Students:* Who writes?

*Teacher:* He writes.

*Students:* He writes.

*Teacher:* What does he write?

*Students:* What does he write?

*Teacher:* He writes his homework every day.

*Students:* He writes his homework every day...

... and so on. (Don't make it too long!)

After that you can change it to a Question and Answer or Call and Response chant using the same words, for example:

### **Write! Write!**

*Teacher:* Write! Write!

*Students:* Write! Write!

*Teacher:* Who writes?

*Students:* He writes.

*Teacher:* What does he write?

*Students:* He writes his homework every day...

### **Next ...**

Now you can *switch parts* - let a student, or group of students, take the 'teacher's part' ... or let students practice it in pairs. And then you can add actions (such as eating actions) and *body rhythm* (clap, click, slap thighs, stamp ...)

*for example:*

Write! (clap-clap) Write! (clap )

Write! (clap-clap) Write! (clap )

(clap) Who writes? (clap)

He (clap-clap) writes! (clap)

What does he write? (clap)

He writes homework (clap clap-clap clap clap) every day.



Note: (*clap-clap*) would be two quick claps, while (clap) is one clap and a pause - make it rhythmical!

Thus it should fit into a four-beat pattern:

1	2	3	4	1 ... etc.
<b>Write!</b>	<i>Clap</i> <i>clap</i>	<b>Write!</b>	Clap	<b>Write!</b> ... etc.

### Think about the learning outcomes

- Make sure that your chant has correct grammar (and pronunciation by you)
- Make sure your chant teaches what you want it to teach.
- Don't try to include too many learning points in one chant.
- Don't make it too long.
- Find a way to make sure it is fun.

### ***For example:***

The chant above teaches the simple present question and answer. "He writes", "He writes homework everyday", "What does he write?"

After that, it might be good to create another chant around "What is he writing?", "He is writing English." to emphasise the difference between Present Simple and Present Continuous which so many ESL learners have problems with.