

# TEACHING CHILDREN ENGLISH WITH CHANTS

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## **Abstract**

*Children seem to be creative and talented in their oral skills with music and visual support. They probably feel easy to learn a new language through different activities with rhythmical sounds and physical movements. Therefore, using chants and songs in English classes has clear advantages for language learning. It motivates children, especially young kids, not only to acquire new vocabulary and grammatical structures in an enjoyable way, but also to use body language or gestures to illustrate meaning. The workshop aims to provide teachers of English and those who are keen on teaching English to children with techniques necessary for conducting chants in the classroom. Participants will also have a chance to observe various demonstrations, to practice, and to create their own chants suitable for their kids. The workshop will partly meet the demands of teaching method innovation and the implementation of the new English curriculum and textbooks at primary schools in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** chant, young learners, rhythm and rhyme

## Introduction

It is clear to find that traditional poems or songs for children from various cultures are often rhythmic, rhyming, or melodic. Music and rhythm, in their many forms, are part of all children's lives. They feel easier to learn and remember poems written in rhyme with the catchy beat like the following:

### **Baa Baa Black sheep** (Nursery rhyme)

•            •            •            •  
*Baa baa black sheep, have you any wool?*  
•            •            •            •  
*Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full!*  
•            •            •            •  
*One for the master, one for the dame,*  
•            •            •            •  
*And one for the little boy who lives down the lane.*

Many studies show that chants and songs are enjoyable and child-friendly tools for teaching a new language to children. Young learners can remember words that they have spoken better than words they have only heard or read. In English classes, chants might be considered a better choice for teachers who want to motivate their students to learn. Using chants seems to be easier than songs because “a chant is simply vocabulary spoken over a background of music or rhythm” (Matt R., 2011). Or a chant is just a short simple poem that is recited or sung along to a catchy melody.

Chants are useful as they have students pronounce the words in rhyme. Rhythm and rhyme helps the children recall separate words or ideas and improve their vocabulary as well as their memory. Saying words aloud can activate children’s auditory memory. The children also express emotions and moods when they are chanting. So, the teachers will keep their concentration on English lessons and strengthen their language acquisition if they use communicatively appropriate chants.

The workshop on “Teaching children English with chants” will enhance the value of chants for young learners, introduce the procedure for presenting chants and provide teachers with techniques necessary for conducting chants in English classrooms. Participants will observe various demonstrations and practice proper activities that might make them confident to create their own chants suitable for their kids. Also, they will be inspired with practical and teacher-created ideas in implementing the new English curriculum and textbooks at primary schools in Vietnam.

## **The value of chants for young learners**

Chanting, for English classes, is the best way to introduce and make young learners familiar with sounds in English. Many chants are repetitive and easy to remember, and students are not required to know how to read or write in English.

Chants can be used in a primary school for a variety of reasons.

- Chants are spoken by the class in rhythmically chorus repetition and sometimes with gestures, so children practice new words in a fun and exciting way.
- Chants offer a rich resource of texts for acting out, so they can build children's confidence in oral language.

- Chanting provides children with a sense of vocabulary and grammatical structures and builds sensitivity to sound system so that children can acquire phonological awareness and phonics.
- Chants can be used to teach language functions, i.e., greeting, offering, asking for permission, asking for information, and giving opinions, etc. So they can promote a sense of community which is conducive to learning.
- Chants develop students' listening and speaking skills, offers opportunities for repeated readings, and serve as a writing prompt as well. So students have chance to build reading fluency and to write new verses.
- Chants can create an exciting and relaxing atmosphere to improve student motivation for acquiring the new language.

Elizabeth Foster (2006, p.63) claimed that using chants in classroom can bring a positive change to young learners. "Children will noticeably increase their vocabulary bank of lexical items and multi-word structures. These structures can include a range of sociolinguistic situations appropriate to the age and needs of the pupils such as greetings, leave-takings, requests and any language items necessary for basic classroom functions and routines". She also confirms that children will improve their performance in the natural rhythm, stress and intonation of conversational English.

With the benefits mentioned above, I insist that teachers be ready to use chants with more excitement and plan for their lessons with actively chants instead of reading texts silently or aloud without any rhythm or melody.

### **Procedure for conducting a chant**

#### **Stage 1: Before teaching chants in your classroom**

- Choose chants suitable for your students' age group and their interests.
- Think of the relevance of the chant or the connection with intended topics of the lesson.
- Match their level of English.
- Think about the type of chant that has a catchy beat to it and easy to remember melody.
- Practice saying and tapping the rhythm of the chant to yourself before introducing it to your class.
- Prepare some visual aids such as, pictures, flashcards, realia, actions, etc. to support the chant. (optional)

#### **Stage 2: In your classroom before you start the chant**

- Write the words to the chants on the blackboard or a chart. (optional)
- Use visuals (pictures, flashcards, actions, ...) to demonstrate key words that students may not be familiar with. (optional)

#### **Stage 3: To teach the chant**

- First say the chant to the students while clapping or snapping of fingers to mark the beat of music.

- Ask the students to repeat it after you. Start with only the first line if the chant consists of several lines.
- Repeat the chant until the students are able to follow along.
- Add gestures or movements when chanting if necessary.
- Divide the class in two groups for practice if necessary.

(Adapted from Teaching Jazz Chants to Young Learners, an English Language Teacher Training video with Carolyn Graham, United States Department of State, Washington, D.C. 2006).

### Tips for conducting chants

- ✓ Start with very short rhymes or chants.
- ✓ Look for chants that have topics your children are learning about.
- ✓ Make sure the children generally understand what they are saying. They do not need to understand every word but maybe the gist of the lines.
- ✓ Use songs and rhymes to play with sounds: speaking softly – shouting loudly.
- ✓ Keep the beat, gestures and sway, play with sound, and even dance.
- ✓ Use simple instruments to add to the rhythm, such as tambourine, bell, drum, cymbal, rhythm sticks.
- ✓ Create supplemental materials to broaden the value of chanting; e.g. matching exercises, cloze exercises, drawing pictures that demonstrate the meaning if desired.
- ✓ Encourage your pupils to say them for family and friends outside school.
- ✓ Record your students chanting if a tape recorder is available.

(Adapted from English for Primary Teachers, A handbook of activities & classroom language by Slattery, M. & Willis, J. Oxford University Press, 2001).

### Some demo chants

The following chants have the rhythm and shown in black dots above the relevant syllables. You and your children can clap along to the beat or you can use bang drums, rhythm sticks, tambourines, etc. if you have them.

#### 1. Name chant: S-U-S-A-N

Language goals:

- Saying the letter of the alphabet
- Learning and remembering the children's names



• • • •  
 S-U - S-A-N  
 • • • •  
 S-U - S-A-N  
 • • • •  
 S-U - S-A-N  
 • • • •  
 S-U - S-A-N Wow!  
 • • • •  
 Susan, Susan, (clap) (clap)  
 • • • •  
 Susan, Susan, (clap) (clap)

*Continue with:*

Julia, David, Alice, Carly, Bella, Hoang (Vietnamese name), Thanh (Vietnamese name)

*Teaching suggestions*

- Ask a student to say her/his name and spell it. (Choose a name with 5 letters)  
E.g. S-U-S-A-N
- Write the name on the board while the student is spelling it.
- Ask students to focus on the beat when you are reciting the chant.
- After the students know the chant well, have them perform it in small groups and then in front of the class.

(Adapted from “*Creating Chants and Songs*” by Carolyn Graham, Oxford University Press, 2006).

## 2. Pointing chant: Point to the ceiling

*Language goals:*

- Following directions in English
- Practicing command forms
- Saying names for objects in the classroom
- Making students feel comfortable and helping them use English during the first days of school.



•                    •  
Point to the ceiling.

•                    •  
Point to the floor.

•                    •  
Point to the window.

•                    •  
Point to the door.

•                    •  
Stand up. Sit down.

•  
Look around.

•                    •  
Point to your teacher.

•                    •  
Point to yourself.

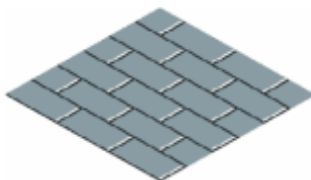
•                    •  
Point to the dustbin.

•                    •  
Point to the shelf.

•                    •  
Clap your hands together.

•                    •  
One, two, three

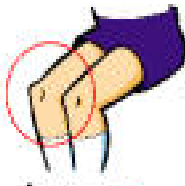
•                    •                    •                    •  
Now sit down and look at me.



### 3. Body parts chant: Point to your eyes

*Language goals:*

- Following directions in English
- Saying names for body parts
- Practicing command forms



•                      •  
 Point to your eyes.  
 •                      •  
 Point to your nose.  
 •                      •  
 Point to your knees.  
 •                      •  
 Point to your toes.  
  
 •                      •  
 Point to your cheeks  
 •                      •  
 Point to your chin  
 •                      •  
 Point to your ears  
 •                      •  
 Point to your lips  
 •                      •  
 Stamp your feet  
 •                      •  
 And keep silent



*Teaching Suggestions*

- Teach a few verses at a time over several days.
- Have the children point to their body parts.
- Get students say the chant and follow the command in small groups.

### 4. Gestures chant: We are robots.

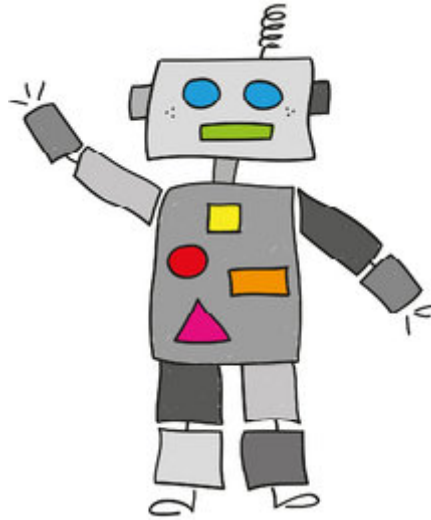
*Language goals:*

- Learning action verbs
- Practicing chanting in chorus
- Working on communication through gestures and group dynamics
- Miming actions to convey meaning

<u>Words</u>	<u>Suggested Actions</u>
Think:	<i>Lift arm stiffly and point to head</i>
Drink:	<i>Mime lifting a cup to your mouth in two sudden movements</i>
Walk:	<i>Walk with straight legs and arms</i>
Talk:	<i>Talk with a mechanical voice</i>
Write:	<i>Mime writing with stiff movements</i>

Read: *Mime reading with stiff movements*  
 Listen: *Put hands on ears and mime listening*  
 Hop: *Stand on one leg and jump into the air with very straight arms and legs*

• •  
 We are robots  
 • •  
 We are robots  
 • •  
 Robots eating  
 • •  
 Robots drinking  
 • •  
 Robots walking  
 • •  
 Robots hopping  
 • •  
 We are robots



• •  
 We are robots  
 • •  
 We are robots  
 • •  
 Robots writing  
 • •  
 Robots reading  
 • •  
 Robots listening  
 • •  
 Robots talking  
 • •  
 We are robots

Optional: jumping, thinking, singing, shopping

#### *Teaching suggestions*

- Say the chant and encourage students to do the actions.
- Say it line by line and ask them to repeat it after you.
- Have the whole class say the chant and mime actions simultaneously.
- Help students practice reading, make large cards, each with one word or phrase of the chant.(optional)
- Do the actions in turn and students say the chant.
- Ask some children to take turns conducting the class.

(Adapted from “Drama with children”, by Sarah Phillips. Oxford University Press, 2002).

### **5. Question & answer chant: Who’s this?**

#### *Language goals:*

- Practicing the stress and rhythm of spoken English
- Taking part in a simple conversation (simple questions and answer exchanges)



• •  
 Who’s this?  
 • •  
 It’s my father.  
 • •  
 Who’s this?  
 • •  
 It’s my mother.  
 • •  
 Who’s this?  
 • •  
 It’s my brother. (It’s my sister.)

#### *Teaching suggestions*



- Show students a photo of family (father, mother, brother, sister)
- Say the chant line by line and show photos of family members in turn.
- Students listen and repeat after you. Then students look and chant.
- Encourage student to practice chanting 2 groups and then in pairs. (One asks and one answers).



(Adapted from “Tiếng Anh 3” book 2, by Vietnam MOET, 2011, p.6)

## 6. Counting chant: Ten fingers on my hands

*Language goals:*

- Counting from 1 to 10
- Recognizing 10 fingers, 2 eyes, 1 nose on the student's body.

	<p>•                    •</p> <p>One, two, three,</p> <p>•                    •</p> <p>Four, five six,</p> <p>•                    •</p> <p>Seven, eight, nine</p> <p>•    •    •</p> <p>Ten, ten, ten</p> <p>•                    •</p> <p>Ten fingers on my hands,</p> <p>•</p> <p>On my hands.</p> <p>•    •                    •</p> <p>Ten fingers on my hands,</p> <p>•</p> <p>On my hands.</p> <p>•                    •</p> <p>Two eyes, one nose,</p> <p>•                    •</p> <p>All on my face</p> <p>•    •                    •</p> <p>Ten fingers on my hands,</p> <p>•</p> <p>On my hands.</p>	
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(Adapted from “Family and Friends 1” by Naomi Simmons, Oxford University Press, 2009, p.22)

### *Teaching suggestions*

- Show 10 ten fingers in turn and count.
- Say the first three lines and clap along to the beat.
- Students listen and repeat after you.
- Spread out all 10 fingers when chanting the next four lines
- Point to the eyes, the nose when chanting the rest lines involving these parts.

### **Conclusion**

Rhythm or melody basically expresses human emotions, so using chants in class can help children learn English with fun and motivation. It also makes kids who are shy about speaking English confident and enhances children’s language acquisition through their bodies, minds, emotions, language, and social interaction. For teachers who are not comfortable with singing in front of your students, chants are useful because chants, in some ways, are a lot easier to teach than a song. Teachers are encouraged to develop, to adapt, or just to recite their chants in the way that they think it is easy, catchy and appropriate for their students.

### **Recommended books and websites useful for teaching English with chants**

Let’s chant, Let’s Sing! (Oxford University Press, 2004) by Carolyn Graham: A six-level course based on chants and songs.

Creating chants and songs (Oxford University Press, 2006) by Carolyn Graham: Extra topic-based activities for using and creating chants and songs in class.

Drama with children, (Oxford University Press, 2002) by Sarah Phillips: practical advice on using chants, rhymes, songs and drama activities to activate children’s language.

<http://www.dreamenglish.com/freechants>: Many wonderful chants and simple songs for children

<http://edamonthlyhandouts.homestead.com/songindex.html>: All songs, rhymes and chants in the alphabetical order.

<http://www.teachchildrenesl.com/songs.htm>: free songs, chants and action rhymes for use in ESL classrooms.

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