

WORKSHOP: Using Rhythm in Language Arts to Improve Language Learning and Motivation

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Introduction

Language Arts are part of the new KSSR in Malaysian schools (Kementarian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010) and educators hope to see good results by including this new subject. One very important outcome for young learners involved in this learning is an improved sense of rhythm, which is very important in their general development as they grow, (DeVeto, 2005), as well as in improving their abilities in language acquisition. (Cakir, 1999) As a bonus, Language Arts activities bring a sense of real fun to language learning, thus increasing the motivation of the children. (Cox, 2008)

Songs and Poems

During this workshop songs and poems will be demonstrated and taught, each of which can be used to improve English Language Learning and Motivation. (Darn, 2007)

1. Pass the Beat

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

The group are in a circle – on chairs, or on the floor, or they can stand. The first time, the teacher could try passing an object around the circle, to make sure the children have a feel for passing something.

The teacher demonstrates hand-clapping to a regular beat and then hand-clapping irregularly. Explain that as a group you are going to try to create a regular beat. You are going to "Pass the Beat" around the circle, with each child providing one beat/clap. If the group has very limited understanding of English language, the

teacher should model and demonstrate rather than resort to explaining in Bahasa Malaysia (BM) – for example the teacher could go around the circle giving a clap in front of each child to a regular beat, and then demonstrate irregular beat.

Teacher claps first, and the next child claps once, and then so on around the circle. If possible, discuss how well it went. Try again going around the other way.

Try other styles, for example:

- Get faster / slower as you go around.
- Each child claps twice, still keeping the beat even. (3 times, 4 times)
- One child claps once, 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.
- Use chop-sticks or other 'instrument' to pass the beat or rhythm.
- 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.

2. 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.

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.

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.

Split the class into four groups. The first groups 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. Here is another verse for fun:

Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream.
If you see a crocodile,
Don’t forget to scream!

Here are 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 sits in the old gum tree

3. 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. The tune is "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!

Here are the 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! And then there is a second verse to the song, which is sung slowly and quietly:

I am dead to the world and very sleepy ... (X2)

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

I am dead to the world and very sleepy.

When teaching this song, speakers of BM need to be extra careful to pronounce the final consonant of each syllable, and to clearly pronounce the 'th' in 'enthusiastic'. If this is difficult, it is best to attach the consonant to the beginning of the following word (if it starts with a vowel).

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

4. *Elephant in the Attic*

This is a fun chant with actions, and children seem to enjoy the mental image of the elephant on a bicycle in the roof-space. 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.

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 and/or arms*)
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!*)

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.

5. Hello! My Name is Joe

This little chant has a fun conversational style that involves 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.

Teacher demonstrates the first verse, at the end of which everyone starts pretending to punch a button with their right hand index finger. Everyone joins in as much as they can (or repeat after the teacher) on the second time through and at the end starts poking with the left index finger (while still keeping the other one going). Then they add one foot, then both feet, and finally their head. (The class could be divided into groups to say the verse in parts.)

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 *..."

*(At this point, *, the teacher indicates the next button to start pushing, while continuing with the others.)*

Here is the final verse (while still punching all 5 buttons):

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!!" **

*** Collapse exhausted at the end!*

Besides the fun, concentrating on the buttons while telling the story strengthens the children's skills in rhythm.

6. *I Left My Wife ...*

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.

Note: Sometimes there are beats (and steps) when there are no words.

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.

Once they have mastered that, the second one is a little more complicated.

Firstly 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 right-left-right 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 L
 I thought it was right, right,
 R L R - L - R
 Right for my country whoop-dee-doo!
 L R L R
 Left, left... (*start again*)

7. *No Bananas in the Sky*

This action song uses the tune ‘There is a tavern in the town’. The first time it is sung including all of the words and actions. The second time through the word ‘bananas’ is omitted, but the actions remain. The third time the words ‘bananas’, and ‘sky’ are both omitted.

There are no bananas in the sky, in the sky
 There are no bananas in the sky, in the sky
 There's a sun
 And a moon
 And a coconut cream pie
 But there are no bananas in the sky, in the sky!

Here are the actions for the words that are gradually omitted:

No: hand motion both hands together then apart (like "cut" for a movie)

Bananas: peel a banana

Sky: point upward on sky (each time)

Sun: gesture a round object in the sky

Moon: another round object on the other side

Coconut cream pie: gesture a fluffy object (like clouds)

The final time through the song, the words are:

There are (action) (action) in the (action) in the (action)

There are (action) (action) in the (action) in the (action)

Just a (action) and a (action) and a (action)

But there are (action) (action) in the (action) in the (action).

As children concentrate on the actions, and only singing the words when they should, they are using their 'inner hearing' and sense of rhythm. And of course they are having fun, and possibly learning some new words. For classes with very limited language, the teacher may use some pictures of the important words, rather than explaining in BM.

8. Fruit Salad

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.

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)

9. 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.

Add movement and/or percussion, and let groups or individuals perform.

10. 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. (Graham, 2011)

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

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 emails to his friend.

Students: He writes emails to his friend...

... 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:

Teacher: Write! Write!

Students: Write! Write!

Teacher: Who writes?

Students: He writes.

Teacher: What does he write?

Students: He writes emails to his friend...

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:*

It's a 4-beat rhythm. # indicates a clap

Write!	# #	Write!	#
Write!	# #	Write!	#
Who	writes?	# #	#
He	# #	writes!	#
What	does he	write?	#
He	writes	e -	mails
#	# #	#	#
e -	very	day.	#

Note: # # would be two quick claps, while # is one clap and a pause - make it rhythmical! Thus it should fit into a four-beat pattern:

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

Conclusion

We all use rhythm, although some of us feel it more easily than others. There are many opportunities to increase rhythm awareness, and motivation, as we teach English to young learners. Besides the direct educational (and especially language learning) advantages, the sheer fun of it all provides valuable motivation to teacher and students.

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