



# Teaching English to Young Learners through Songs

Yuliana

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## Abstract

*Teaching English to Young Learners has become a trend nowadays. In every school, English is taught as one of the main subjects. In teaching young learners is not like teaching adults, children have their own way of learning. Since children like to play and have fun, the learning and teaching process should be suited with the nature of the children themselves. One of the forms of fun activities for children is through music, and songs are the common form of music that children know. Through this paper, the writer wants to show that through songs, children could enhance their language skills, such as speaking, listening and writing.*

**Keywords:** *young learners, music, songs, speaking, listening and writing.*

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Since English has become an international language, more and more people learn English. The importance of English as a world language has made people to learn English as early as possible. In Indonesia for example, English is taught even before the children enter the playgroup, there is a special class for children who are still around two or three years old. This is supported by the fact that the optimum age for children to learn a foreign language is when they are still in a very young age. This phenomenon has made Teaching English to Young Learners, TEYL, become increasingly famous. There are many English courses and the publication of the course books. Before we go on, it is better to look at the definition of young learners in order for us to have the same perspective and knowledge. The definition of Young Learners is children between the ages of about 5 years old to 12 years old (Rixon, 1999), while according to Lynne Cameron; young learners are those under 14 years old. Moreover, the definition of young learners is mainly based on the years spent in the primary or elementary stages of formal education before the transition to secondary school. This is why the ages of the young learners could be varied from one country to the others. Some psycholinguists say that one of the factors to be successful in language learning is young age. There are some explanations for better learning at young age. First, the brain is more adaptable before puberty than after, and that acquisition of languages is possible without self-consciousness at an early age and also because young children have more opportunities than adults. The children are learning all the time without having the worries and responsibility of adults (Brumfit, 1994).

“Children learn through play” is a sentence that has guided early childhood educators for decades. The nature of children is that they like to play and have fun than studying. Isenberg also stated that play is a need of every child and it is an important childhood activity that helps children master all developmental needs (1993). Play is the work of childhood and is important for learning and development. One of the forms of play that children are familiar is music, in the form of songs. The singing games and chants are

the embodiment of symbolic play and imitation. These activities help the children to move from sensorimotor experience to a symbolic transformation of it (Isenberg, 1993).

Music helps children develop cognitive skills, as well as enhances language skills, by singing song, children learn language appreciation, vocabulary and rhyme (Shiple,1998). Another thing is that songs and rhymes are learned by heart, and this may form part of a child's linguistic. Thus, through this paper, the writers wants to explain how teachers can use songs to enhance skills to young learners, such as listening, speaking and writing skills.

When the songs are introduced; the first skill that the children learn is listening. This section will focus on activities which will practice the skills of listening. The activities include detailed listening comprehension, listening for summarizing or writing, listening to isolated vocabulary and listening for word order (Griffie,1992). The first activity is listening comprehension, before being introduced to the songs, the children are given several questions, for example, "Is this song going to be happy or sad?" "Who do you think is the singer, a girl or a boy?" and "Do you think you will like the song?" After answering the questions, the teachers play the song, and followed by other questions. The teacher might ask these questions: "How do you feel when you listen to the songs?" "What words do you remember?" "Do you like this song?" "Why or why not?" The second activity is by providing the children a paraphrased version of the song before they listen it. This activity is especially good to introduce songs that tell stories because it gives children the story line before they listen to the actual song. The activity goes like this, the teachers read the paraphrased version of the song to the children. This is an example from the song *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*.

Rudolph was a reindeer who lived in the north land where there is a lot of snow and ice. He was normal or usual-looking except for his nose. He was the only reindeer with a red nose. But the other reindeer did not like Rudolph because his nose made him look different. They laughed at him. Also they would not let him play games with them.

Then one December night something unusual happened. It was very foggy and Santa Claus could not see. When Santa and his regular reindeer flew into the sky they become lost because they could not see any lights, roads and landmarks. So Santa went to Rudolph and asked him to help him. Santa asked Rudolph to be the lead reindeer. In other words, Rudolph would be in the front and the light from his nose would give enough light for Santa and the other reindeer to see. In that way, they would be able to fly to give presents to girls and boys around the world. After Santa and the reindeer returned to Rudolph's home town, Rudolph was a hero. All the other reindeer were very proud of him and said that everybody in the world would always remember him.

After the children listen to the paraphrase, they listen to the song. The third activity is listening to isolated vocabularies, the teachers give the children two lists of words. The first list is indicated by using numbers and the other one by using the alphabet. The teachers play the song and ask the children to draw a line from a word on the first list to a word on the second list. The two words or phrases should follow each other on the same line in the song. This is the example form the Christmas song, "Silent Night."

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|-----------|---|----------|
| 1. silent | → | a. calm  |
| 2. lost   |   | b. night |
| 3. all is |   | c. gone  |



The fourth activity is listening to word order, the song that can be used is *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*. The teachers prepare a hand-out where all the words are from the songs, the handout is as the example below.

dream	down	row	but	the	merrily
row	boat	stream	gently	merrily	
a	your	is	row	merrily	life merrily

The teacher then play the song, as the children listen, they are asked to circle any words that they do not understand, and they also write the complete lyrics of the song. These are some of the example of using songs to teach the children listening skills. Through the songs the children can enhance their listening skills.

The second skill that the children can learn through songs is speaking skills. Singing a song, however simple, is a pleasing achievement. After the children listen to the song, they would attempt to sing it. Moreover, since the words in the refrain are repeated several times, they are easily memorized. As Rixon (2000) says that one of the most popular formats for songs is that the refrain (a rhythmic section) is repeated many times, and has often been observed to result in spontaneous 'joining in' by the young audience. Teacher of young learners of a language experienced that this exposure to rhythmic utterances benefits retention of words in memory. Griffee (1992) also states that the children practice saying the words in the same way they sing the songs, the children can repeat the words in rhythmic word groups. Thus, the exposure and the repeated words from the songs make it easier for the children to remember the words as a result the children can produce or utter the words. Several activities that can be used to enhance the children speaking skills, for example mini musicals. A mini musical is a performance that has some sort of theme, and contains some singing and some spoken dialogue. Songs can be grouped and be performed for the class. The teacher select a theme for the musical, three to five songs. The songs need to be singable, but the teacher can use only part of the songs, for example, one or two verses of the whole song. The teacher can also consider the children's songs and folk songs. The teachers then write all the spoken dialogues to introduce and connect the story line, and ask the children to perform in front of the class. Another activity is rhyme after rhyme. This activity practices rhyme and gives the children a chance to make up rhymes of their own. The teachers help the children by writing down several vocabulary items to match with the rhyme. The teachers give the children every other line and ask them to fill in the missing lines. The teachers then ask the children to read their new lyrics. Finally, the children listen to the original lyrics to compare, for example:

The bells ring, are you *listening*?  
In the land, snow is \_\_\_\_\_.

Another activity that can be used is song poetry. The teachers give the children lyrics, ask them to underline the lines or phrases they like. The teachers also give the children some pictures, or drawings, and ask the children to match the song line with a picture they feel appropriate. The teacher also asks the children to say the phrases that they choose, and tell their friends the reason for choosing it. The box below shows as examples.

<b>Song Title</b>	<b>Song Line</b>	<b>Types of pictures</b>
Blue, Blue Ocean	'You're sailing out on a blue, blue sea'	water, ocean, sailing, boats
<i>Homeless</i>	'Moonlight sleeping on a midnight lake'	moonlight, lake, sleeping
<i>September Song</i>	'When the autumn weather turns the leaves to ... '	autumn trees, elderly people

After the children learn to listen and speak the words, it is now the time for the children to learn to write. Apart from writing down the lyrics there are many ways to exploit songs for writing practice. According to Griffiee, songs that tell a story do not quite often suggest a narrative that can be written down, and many pieces of music without words convey dramatic narrative to the imagination (1992). There are several activities that suggest various way of getting the children to write, inspired by songs and music. The first activity that can be used to enhance the children writing skills is dictation. Dictation is a good way to introduce a song, especially for singing. After listening to the song many times, children will have not only the words but also the melody. The children are given a short and slow songs, and then the teachers ask the children to write down the lyrics. The teachers play the tape until most of the children can complete the lyrics of the songs. When using dictation, any data you give to your children helps them and makes their job easier – the trick is to give enough information while still challenging them. This activity describes several levels of help. Each step gives more help.

1. The teachers give the children very little help, only the title of the song and some of the words. The teachers list the words on the board in alphabetical order.
2. The teachers write a blank outline of the song on the board. This tells them the number of words pre line. Draw a line for every word. For example, the song *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* would look like this:

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3. This is the same as number 2, but include some of the words.

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Row Row -----
----- down the stream -----
Merrily -----
----- but a -----

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4. Another alternative activity is the teachers give the first two lines. In the following line omit the last word. Continue to omit the words. This idea, as well as the song *Footsteps in the Sand*, is from Ken Wilson (Griffiee,1992).

I'm writing you a letter  
I write one every day  
I'm looking at ...  
I saw ...



I ...

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..... right away

.....on the phone.

The next activity that can be used is the cloze passage. The cloze passage is any written material with every  $n^{\text{th}}$  word blanked out. It is the most familiar and popular song activity currently used and the most familiar one (Griffie,1992). The teachers prepare the hand out, for example, if the teacher decided to blank out every fifth word of the song *My Country Tis of Thee*, it would look like this:

My country tis of \_\_\_\_\_

Sweet land of liberty,

\_\_\_\_\_ thee I sing

With the missing or blanked-out words being 'thee' and 'of'.

An alternative to blanking out every  $n^{\text{th}}$  word is to blank out a teaching point, e.g. blank out the prepositions. This focuses the cloze in the direction the teachers want. In the classroom, the teachers ask children to listen to the song and hand out the cloze song lyrics. The teachers ask the children to listen until they are able to fill in all the blanks or give up.

Since the nature of the children like to play and have fun, it is possible for the teachers to teach the young learners through the fun activity. One form of fun activities that the children know and familiar is music, and the simple form of music is song. Through songs and the fun activity make the children learn the language unconsciously, and in a fun way. Through songs, the children can enhance their language skills such as listening, speaking and writing. These three skills are put in order, since the first skills that the children learn is listening the songs, and after that the children learn to speak or sing the song, the last thing, the children learn to write the lyrics of the songs. The activity is not only lead to the fun activity of the children but also the skills' development of the students.

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