

## First Step to Effective Listening: “Listen and Show” Songs

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### **Abstract:**

The listening skill is considered as the most important outcome of early language teaching and songs are regarded as one of the best ways for practicing and developing the listening skills of especially young learners. Therefore, any syllabus designed for teaching foreign languages to young learners specifically focuses on the development of the listening skill and contains songs as effective listening materials. The purpose of this study is therefore twofold: first a theoretical discussion will be presented about listening skills and young learners, second an example lesson guideline will be provided for “listen and show” songs for teaching English to young learners at the beginning level, by means of which teachers around the world can apply to songs of their own choosing.

**Key Words:** *English, young learners, listening skill, songs*

### **Introduction:**

Teaching English to young learners (YLS) has become its own field of study as the age of compulsory English education has become lower and lower in countries around the world and the listening skill is set as a priority in most of the primary education curricula. Total Physical Response (TPR) methodology seems to be the pioneering way of teaching English to YLS and using songs to this effect increasingly gain popularity around the world. As Kirsch (2006) argues, singing is definitely one of the most effective language learning strategies reported by most children. Likewise, Klein (2005) argues that children respond enthusiastically to songs and welcome them. Indeed many teachers of YLS know the value of songs in the English language classroom.

In the present paper the importance of songs, as effective listening materials for YLS, will be clarified and one specific example deriving from my teaching experience will be given in detail for “listen and show” type of songs. I hope that by means of the initial discussion and through the example provided in the present paper, English language teachers of YLS around the world will use such enjoyable and effective means to enhance YLS’ listening skills.

### **The Listening Skill and Young Learners:**

As argued by Phillips (1993), listening tasks are extremely important in the primary foreign language (FL) classroom, providing a rich source of language data from which the children will begin to build up their own idea of how the language works. This knowledge forms a base or resource which they will eventually draw on in order to produce language themselves. Yet, some people think that listening is passive because children do not need to produce sounds when they are listening. But this is not true. Learners can and should be actively engaged in listening tasks and activities (Linse, 2005).

It is now generally agreed that effective listening requires as much attention and mental activity as speaking and writing. Listening can be seen primarily as the active use of language to access other people's meanings. Listening is the receptive use of language and in active listening, the goal of the mental work is to make sense and is thus naturally meaning-focused rather than language focused (Cameron, 2001).

Listening skill is indeed the initial stage both in the case of language acquisition and FL learning. Therefore, we as FL teachers have to equip our students with the necessary strategies for effective listening. As argued by Sharpe (2001), the promotion of children's speaking and listening skills lie at the heart of effective learning in all subjects of the primary curriculum. Therefore the development of pupils' listening skills should be a key aim of primary teaching. So, pupils should be taught to listen effectively and critically.

To this end, Linse (2005) argues that any type of listening activity for young learners should try to present information using the *auditory*, *tactile* and *visual* learning channels. Listening activities should be accompanied with visual images and physical motions. In this respect, the example song provided in the present paper calls especially for *auditory* and *visual* learning channels.

### **Advantages of Using Songs as Listening Activities:**

The exposition of the language learner to necessary and sufficient input is considered as one of the most important factors in language learning process. Evaluated from this point of view, one of the prominent features of songs is their rhythmic and repetitive nature. The repetitive nature of songs, the joy songs impose to the learning activity and the associative power between the melody and the content of the word reinforce the attainment of the language to be internalized. When an input is assimilated through songs, that input is stored with other co-occurring elements, that is, the melody of the song and the emotional elements germinated by the melody. Multiple clues related to the stored input foster the retrieval processes from the registry web in the semantic and structural schemata. Thus, the use of songs in listening activities will ease both internalization and retrieval processes of the phonologic forms of language.

The fostering influence of songs in the learning of a FL doubles in the case of YLs. This is because children are keener to rhythm and they have not yet constructed personal barriers as it is stated by Krashen (1981). Johnstone (2002) who favours an early start to the learning and teaching of modern FLs (MFLs) claims that providing the children with a sufficient amount of input and interaction, embedded in a range of intrinsically interesting cross-curricular activity is important. Therefore, teachers of YLs may make an important contribution to children's early language education by introducing their classes to recorded songs, poems, stories, and etc. As pointed out by Çakır (1999) as well, music can be a wonderful medium for natural language learning. Songs are comprehensible, enjoyable, authentic and full of language we need in real life. They are part of our lives and they are around us.

It strikes the eye that there is a vast literature on the advantages of using songs as listening activities, however due to word limits I prefer to provide a summary below. As for these reasons, songs are considered to be a *sine qua non* of teaching MFLs to YLs:

- *Songs are regarded as the most effective way of teaching listening comprehension to YLs*
- *Songs are a common feature of many primary MFL curricula*
- *Songs are regarded as one of the mostly-enjoyed activities and one the most effective language learning strategies by most YLs*
- *Songs, when used in appropriate ways, may extend YLs' attention spans*
- *Songs are regarded as a good means for age-related language learning*
- *Songs are believed to accelerate memorization*
- *Songs provide a variety of comprehensible input*
- *Songs provide safe and natural classroom ethos*
- *Songs provide a large amount of repetition which is not tedious and which results in automatic use of the target language*
- *Songs provide a rich source of culturally-related elements*

### **How to Teach Songs: Teaching Procedures:**

To begin with, a word of caution is necessary at this point. As language teachers we should always bear in mind that our main responsibility is to teach the target language. No matter how fun and enjoyable activities songs may be for YLs, we should not be carried away and overdrawn by the music and rhythm of songs. Our main responsibility is not to teach '*singing skills*' but to teach the target language. Therefore, if songs are used ineffectively and in meaningless ways they can easily become mere entertainment and pleasurable interruptions in the school day which, in the long term, results in pupils being bored and losing interest. There should be a clear reason in the language teacher's mind as to why and how to use a song. Songs can only be an effective means of developing children's language skills when they are well

integrated into a scheme of work, carefully selected and presented for the cognitive and linguistic needs of YLs.

Even though there are a number of different ways that songs can be presented to YLs, Phillips (1993) argues that one effective way of presenting songs to young learners in a meaningful way is through incorporating some of the techniques from the TPR approach. She argues that this is an extremely useful and adaptable teaching technique, especially in primary classes. Overall, there seems to be a consensus that a three-staged approach would be the most effective to this end. The stages generally recommended are: pre-teaching, while-teaching and post-teaching.

### **An Example Lesson Plan: My Alphabet\***

- Vocabulary Focus: The English Alphabet, Personal Pronouns: I/you, Possessive Adjectives: my, and other words in the song
- Grammar Focus: The Present Continuous
- Student Gains:
  - a. Students know the meanings and say the correct pronunciation of: the letters in the English alphabet, “I/you/my” and other words in the song;
  - b. Students show the relevant flashcard as they listen to the song.
  
- **Pre-teaching activities:**
  - a. The teacher (T) maintains that the classroom CD player is ready for use and everyone in the class can hear equally well. The T then delivers the handouts prepared for this song (see Appendix 1).
  - b. Next the T delivers the flashcard page (see Appendix 2).
  - c. The T reads the title aloud and explains the title through visuals on the handout. If absolutely necessary, the teacher may use the students’ native language at this point.
  - d. The T explains any unknown words through visuals and flashcards. As seen in Appendix 2, there are a total of five double-sided flashcards for this song. The T asks the students to cut off/tear off the relevant pictures while explaining the lyrics of the song.
  
- **While-teaching activities:**
  - a. First Listening: As Harmer (1991), points out once will not be enough; the first listening is often used just to give students an idea of what the

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\* the song and the flashcards are adapted from English Through Songs: Teaching English in Primary Schools, by Mustafa Şevik. Printed in 2010 by Gündüz Eğitim ve Yay. (ISBN: 978-6055584153).

listening material sounds like. Let the students listen to the song without any interruptions so that they will have an opportunity to hear the music and the lyrics. This may also be termed as '*free listening*'. While I was teaching this song, I found the '*free listening*' activity quite beneficial and motivating for my students. In a later discussion with my students, they expressed very positive feelings as well.

- b.* Next read the lyrics of the song aloud and ask the students to listen and follow from the handout.
- c.* Then read the lyrics aloud line by line showing the relevant flashcard and ask for repetition. At this stage, also ask the students to show the flashcards in order of hearing, which have already been cut off/ torn off.

To give an example:

T: says "A,B,C,D,E" and at the same time shows the front side of the relevant flashcard and asks the students to do the same; then,

T: says "*I am climbing an apple tree*" and turns the back side of the flashcard and asks the students to do the same (the same routine is carried out until all the song is covered in the same manner). At this stage the T, depending on necessity and time, may make use of class repetition, group repetition or individual repetitions.

- d.* Second Listening: Play the song again and guide the students both by singing and showing the relevant flashcards. Meanwhile, ask the students to show the relevant flashcards as they listen to the song. My own experience demonstrated that hearing the teacher sing the song helps the students to overcome feelings of confidence and shyness.
- e.* Third Listening: This is the stage when students are asked to sing the song along with the CD or the teacher line by line. As a T, check for correct intonation and pronunciation, and do some remedial work on any problematic intonation or pronunciation.
- f.* Final Listening: Ask the students to sing the complete song along with the CD and join in the singing. Also ask the students to show the relevant flashcards as they hear them. My own experience demonstrated that final listening can be carried out a few times, as the students were very eager and interested in singing the whole song.

- **Post-teaching activities and teaching ideas:**

- a.* Depending on student number, the T may divide the class into two or three groups, i.e. as girls and boys or as those who are sitting on the right/left/middle rows. Each group is assigned a part of the song and is asked to sing along with the CD and show the relevant flashcard. The

teacher may wish to turn this into a competition, by assigning points to every correct pronunciation and showing of flashcard. The same may be done by selecting individual volunteer students as well.

- b.** The T may also choose to play a game in the following format: tell a line from the song and ask the students to show the correct flashcard. The quickest student or group to show the correct flashcard wins a point. You may wish to do just the opposite by showing a flashcard and asking for the line. Both games were very popular among the students/groups during my own teaching.
- c.** In order to assess correct pronunciation of the alphabet, and to maintain long-term learning through personalizing the alphabet, the following task may be carried out by the T:

T: *'My name is Yasemin. I can spell my name. Y-a-s-e-m-i-n. Can you spell your name?'* (You may also write this sentence on the board and ask the students to copy)

Student: says *"My name is Arda. I can spell my name. A-r-d-a"* and asks to another S, *"Can you spell your name?"* and etc.

During my own teaching, I had to carry out this activity until every student in the class had an opportunity to tell their names and ask a question. In the meantime, I rewarded every correct response with a simple clap, which the students loved the best.

- d.** To practice the *"present continuous tense"*, I carried out the following activity:

T: says *"Look at the second flashcard"* and shows an appropriate flashcard, and writes the question *"What is she doing?"* The T replies *"She is climbing an apple tree"* and writes the response on the board. Later ask questions about every appropriate flashcard in the handout and wait for student response. If there are any other action verbs that you have taught, you may mime an action and ask the students: *"What am I doing?"* and wait for a response.

- e.** I ended the lesson with the following game, which enjoyed great popularity:

*'Stand up if your name begins with the letter ...'*

### Conclusion:

Under the light of the discussion carried out so far, it is possible to argue that listening is the initial step of language learning and of language acquisition. Hence, the importance of the listening skill seems to have a priority in teaching MFLs to YLs when compared to other language skills of speaking, reading and writing. As a reflection of this fact, listening skill is mostly given priority in most of the primary MFL teaching curricula throughout Europe and the development of pupils' listening skills is a key aim of primary MFL teaching.

Listening tasks provide a rich source of comprehensible input for YLs from which they will eventually draw on in order to produce language themselves. Listening skill is generally regarded as a receptive skill but yet it is not a passive activity at all, and YLs should be actively engaged in listening tasks and activities. The main method of exposing students to spoken English (after the teacher) is through the use of taped material and listening to appropriate tapes provides a rich input for anyone wanting to learn a language. Listening activities in class should be accompanied with visual images and physical motions. To this end, songs when selected carefully and implemented purposefully readily provide such opportunities. Therefore, teachers of YLs may make an important contribution to YLs' early language education by introducing their classes to songs. Songs provide the occasion of real language in meaningful situations and they are comprehensible, enjoyable, authentic and full of language we need in real life.

Singing is one of the most effective language learning strategies reported by most children. However, if songs are used ineffectively and in meaningless ways they can easily become mere entertainment and pleasurable interruptions. Hence, there should be a clear reason as to why and how to use a song and songs need to be well integrated into a scheme of work. Meaningful songs should be chosen that suit the cognitive and linguistic needs of pupils. It is my hope that the example provided in this study will prove helpful for teachers of English to YLs all around the world and reinforce the practice of songs in EFL/ESL contexts.

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## Appendix 1: My Alphabet

♩=90



I can say my alphabet

Do you want to make a bet ?



A, B, C, D, E

I am climbing an apple tree



F, G, H, I, J

I am looking for the monkey

K, L, M, N, O, P, Q



I am waiting in a queue

R, S, T, U, V



I am drinking tea

W, X, Y, Z

And I win the bet

Appendix 2: Flashcards



