

# RECITE, PLAY AND PRONOUNCE ENGLISH JOYFULLY WITH RHYMES AND CHANTS!<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In this article nursery rhymes and chants are described. These are poems which are authentic, and poems which have been composed specifically for the teaching of languages, respectively. They offer many benefits, such as the development of the listening and the speaking skills, insights into Anglophone cultures, and enjoyment for both teacher and children. Nursery rhymes and chants inspire games, handicrafts and acting out, and ideas are given for exploiting them successfully in the Primary classroom.

**Keywords:** Nursery rhymes; chants; English; Primary

**Resumen:** En este artículo se examinan las rimas infantiles (*nursery rhymes*) y los *chants*, poemas auténticos y poemas compuestos específicamente para la enseñanza de las lenguas, respectivamente. Se describen sus beneficios, tales como el desarrollo de las destrezas auditiva y oral, el mayor conocimiento de las culturas anglófonas, y el fomento de un ambiente de aprendizaje distendido y alegre. Se verá que frecuentemente las rimas y los *chants* pueden formar la base de juegos, manualidades y escenificaciones, y se dan ejemplos de cómo se pueden usar para sacar un provecho máximo de ellos en el aula del inglés de Primaria.

**Palabras clave:** rimas infantiles; *chants*; inglés; Primaria

## Why use rhymes and chants in the Primary English classroom?

Both rhymes and chants are a useful resource for the teacher in the English classroom at Primary level because not only do young learners readily relate to their topics, such as the family, animals, school, the weather, play, and food, but also rhymes and chants can develop listening and speaking skills, especially pronunciation, accompany actions or handicrafts, enhance positive emotional bonds among the children, and offer insights into Anglophone cultures.

## What are rhymes and chants?

Children's rhymes, more commonly called "nursery rhymes", are short, anonymous poems, which children recite, and often sing to, dance to and act out, and whose themes reflect children's life and experiences. They are authentic poems and are literally "rhymes for the nursery," which was a room where in Victorian times, the nurse

(*niñera*) looked after the children of the household (a typical nursery can be seen in the film *Mary Poppins*). While some of the language in nursery rhymes may be outdated or indeed obsolete, their origins may be a matter of speculation, and some of the happenings they depict may seem absurd, to this day nursery rhymes remain a favourite with English-speaking children around the world. The first page of Goodreads Popular Nursery Rhymes Books shows that 24 out of the 50 nursery rhymes books listed were published after 2010, available at <https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/nursery-rhymes>

Chants are “songs without music or like [...] poems with a very strong beat” (translated from Sarah Phillips, 1996: 104). Extremely well known are Carolyn Graham’s *Jazz Chants for Children* (1979), which are “designed to teach the natural rhythm, stress and intonation patterns of conversational American English” (Graham, 1979, ix). Many chants have been composed especially for the teaching of English and have been incorporated into Primary student's books. They have topics directly related to the unit they accompany, and often have “modern” rhythms, such as rap (Stephenson, 2003).

### **Two typical nursery rhymes: *Little Miss Moffat* and *Pat-a-Cake*, *Pat-a-Cake***

Little Miss Muffet  
*Little Miss Muffet*  
*Sat on a tuffet,*  
*Eating her curds and whey.*  
*There came a big spider*  
*That sat down beside her*  
*And frightened Miss Muffet away.*

The theme of this nursery rhyme is a universal one (fear of spiders) and the situation is a typical one in a child's life (enjoyment of something being interrupted and spoilt by a fright). The rhyme scheme is aabccb and its rhymes are true, that is, the phonemes at the end of the line are repeated exactly at the end of the next rhyming line:

- ɪt
- ɪt
- eɪ
- aɪdə

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- aɪə
- eɪ

Some of the words in this rhyme are archaic (“tuffet,” meaning mound of grass), or surely unknown by most children (“curds and whey”, which are components of milk). In the classroom, the rhyme lends itself to reciting, drawing and acting out by the children.

### Pat-a-Cake, Pat-a-Cake

*Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man,  
Bake me a cake as fast as you can.  
Pat it and prick it and mark it with “B”,  
And put it in the oven for baby and me.*

The topics of this rhyme are the family and food (a child is taking his or her baby brother or sister to the baker's to order a cake), and ambience is one of brotherly/sisterly affection. While the language of this rhyme is less obscure than in *Miss Muffet*, the expression “baker's man” is unusual, and would ordinarily be “baker”. The rhyme scheme is aabb, with an interior consonant rhyme in the third line: “pat it and prick it”.

### **Nursery rhymes for cultural insights: *Hot cross buns* and *Thirty days has September***

Hot Cross Buns!  
*Hot cross buns!*  
*Hot cross buns!*  
*One a penny!*  
*Two a penny!*  
*Hot cross buns!*  
*If you have no daughters,*  
*Give them to your sons.*  
*One a penny!*  
*Two a penny!*  
*Hot cross buns!*

This rhyme is based on the cry of the seller of Hot Cross Buns as he or she sold his/her wares in the street at Easter time. Hot

Cross Buns are small round sweet buns, decorated with a cross to symbolise the crucifixion of Christ. While Hot Cross Bun street sellers are rare or non-existent nowadays, supermarkets and shops still sell these breads at Easter. In Spanish I have seen Hot Cross Buns translated as *Panecillos de Viernes Santo*, and you can find a recipe for them at the following link, available at: <http://www.directoalpaladar.com/recetas-de-panes/hot-cross-buns-panecillos-de-viernes-santo-receta-de-semana-santa>

### Thirty Days Has September

*Thirty days has September,  
April, June and November.  
All the rest have thirty-one,  
Excepting February alone,  
And it has twenty-eight days' time  
But in leap years,  
It has twenty-nine.*

This is a memory rhyme, which children (and adults) use to remember the number of days in each month, and is comparable to the mnemonic Spanish rhyme "*Treinta días tiene noviembre*".

### **Finger rhymes: *Two Little Dicky Birds* and *Incy Wincy Spider***

The first rhymes the baby usually hears are those his or her mother, father or carer recites, while moving the baby's fingers, toes, hands and arms in time to the poem. These rhymes open up a world of imagination and metaphor to the child, which will develop as he or she grows. In school, many rhymes are accompanied by finger and hand movements, and may be supported by handicrafts or acting out. The following two rhymes have instructions for hand and finger movements after each line.

#### Two Little Dicky Birds

*Two little dicky birds sat upon a wall,*  
(The child "bounces" his/her two index fingers, one representing Peter, one representing Paul)  
*One named Peter, one named Paul.*  
(The index fingers keep "bouncing")  
*Fly away, Peter! Fly away, Paul!*

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(The child puts his/her index fingers behind his/her back, first Peter, then Paul)

*Come back, Peter! Come back, Paul!*

(The child brings his/her index fingers back again, Peter first, then Paul)

*Fly away, all!*

(The child puts his/her fingers behind his back again)

In my experience children love this rhyme. In class, the children simply recite while moving their hands and fingers as described above, or they can cut out two paper birds (a Twitter silhouette is perfect) and they stick them on to their index finger nails with Bluetack (*pincha adhesiva*). This way, the birds are much more “real.” (Note that although Bluetack/*pincha adhesiva* is not poisonous, teachers must point out that it is not chewing gum, and children must not put it in their mouths.) Alternatively, the teacher can choose two children to act as Peter and Paul, who stand one at each side of her, jumping and flapping their “wings.” While she and the rest of the children recite the rhyme, “Peter” and “Paul” jump up and down, fly away and come back as the rhyme progresses.

### Incy wincy spider

*Incy wincy spider climbing up the spout.*

(The children lift their arms and twist their hands together, to make a climbing “spider”)

*Down came the rain and washed the spider out.*

(They drop their arms suddenly)

*Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.*

(They trace a huge sun in the air and lift their hands while fluttering their fingers to show the rain drying)

*Incy wincy spider climbed the spout again.*

(The children lift their arms and twist their hands together, to make a climbing “spider” again)

To accompany this rhyme, the children can make a mural of the scene (either a drawing or a collage of cut-outs). There can be several houses, each with a water spout (usually depicted as a drainpipe going down the wall). The sky will be stormy with lots of clouds and rain. Spiders can be at different places in the spouts, at the bottom, at the top or getting washed out. Or each child can make

his or her individual drawing or collage of Incy Wincy in his predicament.

**Two action rhymes: *Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear* and *Ring a Ring a Roses***

Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear

*Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear  
Touch your nose.  
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear,  
Touch your toes.  
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear,  
Hands on head.  
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear,  
Wake up now.  
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear,  
Take your bow.*

The children stand up and carry out the actions as they recite the rhyme.

Ring a Ring a Roses

*Ring a Ring a Roses  
A pocket full of posies  
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!  
We all fall down!*

This rhyme is thought to have originated at the time of the Great Plague (*peste bubónica*) of 1665, whose first symptoms were a sneeze. People used to carry a small bunch of flowers (posy) to smell while they were out in the street, believing that their perfume prevented infection. Here the children stand in a circle, holding hands, and walk round as they recite the rhyme (they are the “ring of roses”). When they say “A-tishoo! A-tishoo!” they pretend to sneeze and everyone falls to the ground (dead from the plague) at the end. Again, children love this rhyme: the holding hands with their friends, the sneezing and especially the falling down.

## Chants

Unlike nursery rhymes, which are anonymous traditional poems, and as such constitute authentic material in the classroom, chants have been devised specifically with language learning in mind, especially pronunciation. They are an “energetic ... approach to language acquisition for the elementary school child, particularly because the strong rhythmic patterns of the chants bear a close relation to children's games and the child's natural affinity for rhythm and movement (Graham, 1979: ix). Aspects of pronunciation developed in chants are individual sounds, word stress, sentence stress, rhythm, intonation and linking. In the same way as authentic nursery rhymes do, chants reflect children's emotions and experiences and may be complemented by many classroom activities such as games and puzzles.

### **Writing your own jazz chant: A challenge for the teacher! A challenge for the children!**

Teachers and children might find it exciting to write their own jazz chants. First brainstorm ideas: these may be inspired by a unit in the student's book, by an event at school, or by the weather. Invent a catchy sentence about your idea and repeat it (it doesn't have to be complicated). If possible find a rhyming sentence or phrase (if the rhyme or the rhythm isn't perfect, don't worry). Invent another related sentence, repeat it and then invent another rhyming sentence or phrase. For example:

*Look at the rain!*  
*Look at the rain!*  
*We can't go out. What a pain!*  
*Now it's sunny!*  
*Now it's sunny!*  
*Let's go out. That will be funny!*

As we have seen traditional rhymes or modern chants are a beneficial accompaniment to many aspects of language learning in the Primary classroom: they are useful to the teacher and a joy for the child.

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<sup>1</sup> ***Las rimas y los chants: ¡Recita, juega y pronuncia el inglés con alegría!***

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