

# Singable Books: Sing and Read Your Way to English Proficiency

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## Introduction

Teachers regularly use reading aloud to bond with students, generate conversation, and introduce the joys of literacy. Reading aloud offers additional benefits for English language learners, including introduction to new vocabulary and English grammar (Ghosn, 2002; Smallwood, 1991). However, these benefits vary with the method of delivery (Teale, 2003). This digest introduces an easy, effective method of reading aloud using singable books. Although this digest focuses on English language learners, the use of singable books can benefit all students.

Smallwood (2006) defines singable books as picture books that use a song as the text. Singable books are inherently interactive and appealing to children. The melody is often familiar to American-born teachers, but in any event, the musical notation and all the words are usually included at the end of the book. Pictures help illustrate the text of the song. And the teacher does not have to be a great (or even a good) singer to succeed with this method, as the authors of this digest can testify!

## Benefits of Singable Books

Singable books provide a simple, cost-effective way to combine the benefits of reading children's literature aloud and singing for English language learners, as illustrated in the Venn diagram in Figure 1. The benefits of using children's literature include increased vocabulary and phonemic awareness, which are especially important for literacy development in English language learners (August & Shanahan, 2006), linking the circles for children's literature and for English language and literacy acquisition in Figure 1. Singing, the third circle, introduces musical benefits for English language learners (ELLs), including increased motivation (e.g., Kennedy & Scott, 2005), enhanced neurological effects, and fluency development.

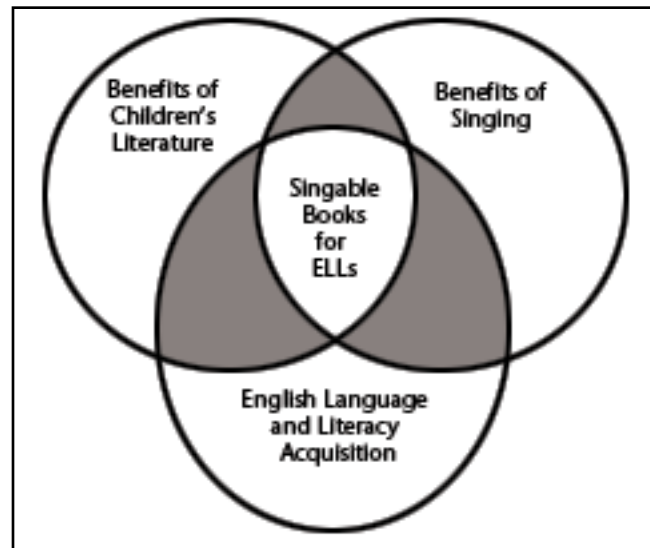


Figure 1. The combined benefits of singing and reading aloud with English language learners

A number of studies (e.g., Collins, 2005; Elley, 1989) have shown that using children's literature with English language learners enhances vocabulary development. Singing may give an additional boost to the process, linking all three circles in Figure 1. Spinner reports that "guided singing provides an extremely effective way to learn new vocabulary and idioms in a meaningful context" (2006, p. 14). Indeed, Medina (1993) found greater vocabulary acquisition for English language learners who had books sung to them than for similar students who had books read aloud to them.

Singable books also provide numerous opportunities to develop learners' phonemic awareness, further linking the circles in Figure 1. For example, in just the first page of *Miss Mary Mack* (see Recommended Singable Books and Activities), children are introduced to the rhyming words *Mack*, *back*, and *black*, allowing them to hear the distinctions among the onset sounds /m/, /b/, and /bl/. Different groups of rhyming words continue through-

out the book. As students sing along, they practice new combinations of phonemes that may not occur in their native language. Inviting children to participate with singable books is an engaging approach to literature, addressing the National Reading Panel's suggestion that phonemic awareness development "be as relevant and exciting as possible" (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, p. 2.7).

Additional benefits for language acquisition that are derived from singing are represented by the intersection of the singing and English language acquisition circles. Recent research in the field of neuroscience has shown strong connections between musical and linguistic processing in the brain (e.g., Patel, 2003). While this research has not specifically examined the neural effects of using music to teach language, it does point to the interconnectedness between music and language. Stories abound of the memory effects of song. The 93-year-old grandmother of one of the authors of this digest recalls taking Spanish classes 60 years ago. Though she barely remembers a word of the language, she can still sing the songs she learned in class. These types of anecdotes are common (see, e.g., Spinner, 2006) and further support the power of music for language learning. Singable books also provide a natural resource for encouraging fluency, because most children want to sing the songs repeatedly. For example, the lead author of this digest has experimented with both reading and singing a highly repetitive singable book, *Roll Over* (see Peek, 1999, under Additional Recommended Singable Books). The students, all English language learners, quickly became bored with the prose version but couldn't stop singing the musical version.

Finally, children who are quiet in class for cultural or other reasons may benefit from singable books. For example, Swisher and Deyhle (1992) report that many Native American children value cooperative learning, where no one makes open displays of knowledge. Singing in unison allows children to comfortably participate as part of a group. Although singing is not appealing to all children, singable books provide an additional tool to engage students in active learning.

## Selection Criteria for Singable Books

Important criteria for selecting picture books to use with English language learners have been well documented (e.g., Smallwood, 2002). These criteria include limited text per page, connection to curriculum, explanatory illustrations, and grammar and vocabulary compatible with students' English proficiency levels. This section provides additional guidelines specifically for selecting singable books.

**Does the book use rhyming words?** Rhymes like those in *Miss Mary Mack* (Hoberman, 1998) develop phonemic awareness with their focus on minimal pairs.

**Does the book use repeated grammatical patterns?** Patterns like those in *If You're Happy and You Know It* (Cabrera, 2005) (e.g., imperatives and if-then clauses) provide repeated grammatical practice.

**Does the book use musical features that facilitate repetition?** A chorus or cumulative verse, as in *The House That Jack Built* (Stow, 1992), helps learners develop English fluency and intonation patterns.

**Is the song or melody generally familiar? If not, is a CD included with the book? Are all the words and the musical notation included at the end?** These features help teachers who are not familiar with the tune or the words. For example, in *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* (Barnwell, 1998), Sweet Honey in the Rock reads and sings the book on a CD, which is included.

**Does the author provide a new variation on a familiar song?** For example, *Seals on the Bus* (Hort, 2003) is a creative spin on the familiar song, "Wheels on the Bus." This feature allows the teacher to introduce new vocabulary and the students to practice comparing and contrasting the variations between the two songs.

## Recommended Singable Books and Activities

When singable books are used with English language learners, language acquisition and literacy development can be strengthened through pre- and post-lesson activities. Essential pre-lesson activi-

ties include explaining unfamiliar vocabulary and introducing the tune. Several post-singing activities, based on ideas from teachers in St. Louis (Missouri) Public Schools, are described below. These books and activities reflect the research findings on phonemic awareness and vocabulary development discussed earlier in this digest.

### **Miss Mary Mack**

by M. Hoberman; illustrated by N. Westcott  
Little, Brown and Co. (1998)

Grade Level: preK–3; ESL Level: Beginning

This familiar hand-clapping game has been expanded into a fun storybook featuring an elephant and a little girl. Directions for the game are included along with the tune. **Post-singing:** Have students practice phonemic awareness skills by identifying sounds that are the same or different in rhyming groups. Transition to phonics by having students read the rhyming groups on cards. Challenge the class, even Grades 4–6, to create rhyming variations with Mary Mack wearing different colors (e.g., pink).

### **No Mirrors in My Nana's House**

by Y. Barnwell; illustrated by S. Saint James  
Harcourt Brace (1998)

Grade Level: 4–6; ESL Level: Intermediate

This powerful book about self-esteem highlights African American culture and features striking illustrations. **Post-singing:** Teach similes and metaphors using vocabulary examples from this book. Use the book's theme—seeing beauty in everything—as a writing prompt.

### **America the Beautiful**

by K. Bates; illustrated by W. Minor  
G. P. Putnam's Sons (2003)

Grade Level: 7–12; ESL Level: Advanced

In this stunning version of the song, each verse is illustrated line by line. It is a complete resource for a social studies lesson, with background information provided. **Post-singing:** Teach students to enrich their writing through the use of modifiers (e.g., *spacious* to describe *skies*). Have students explain a line of the text, making connections to their own experiences. Have students identify the book's illustrations from their locations on the U.S. map that is provided.

## **Conclusion**

This digest has introduced singable books as a simple yet effective classroom method to engage students in active English language learning. It has also presented research on the potential benefits of singable books for literacy acquisition. Unfortunately, few studies have been conducted explicitly on singable books; however, this area is very promising for future research. Currently, all available evidence points to its efficacy as a language teaching method. We hope that teachers will find this information valuable and that they, along with their students, will enjoy these books and activities.

## **Additional Recommended Singable Books**

### **Grades PreK–3**

Cabrera, J. (2005). *If you're happy and you know it*. New York: Holiday House.

Hort, L. (2003). *Seals on the bus*. New York: Holt.

Miller, J. P., & Greene, S. M. (2005). *We all sing with the same voice*. New York: Harper Collins.

Peek, M. (1999). *Roll over! A counting song*. New York: Clarion Books.

Shulman, L. (2004). *Old MacDonald had a woodshop*. New York: G. P. Putnam.

Weiss, G. D., & Thiele, B. (1995). *What a wonderful world*. New York: Atheneum.

### **Grades 4–6**

Garriel, B. S. (2004). *I know an old fellow who swallowed a cello*. New York: Scholastic.

Gershwin, G., Gershwin, I., Heyward, D., & Heyward, D. (2002). *Summertime*. New York: Aladdin.

Jackson, A. (2002). *I know an old lady who swallowed a pie*. New York: Puffin Books.

Marsh, T. J., & Ward, W. (2002). *Way out in the desert*. Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon Books.

### **Grades 7–12**

Spier, P. (1990). *The star-spangled banner*. New York: Doubleday.

Stow, J. (1992). *The house that Jack built*. New York: Penguin.

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## About CAL

CAL is a private, nonprofit organization working to improve communication through better understanding of language and culture. Established in 1959, CAL has earned an international reputation for its contributions to the fields of bilingual education, English as a second language, literacy, foreign language education, dialect studies, language policy, refugee orientation, and the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children. CAL's experienced staff of researchers and educators conduct research, design and develop instructional materials and language tests, provide technical assistance and professional development, conduct needs assessments and program evaluations, and disseminate information and resources related to language and culture.

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