

Creating English Songs with Familiar Music for EFL Classrooms in Japanese Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This paper introduces a compilation of simple and easy English songs designed for children learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). While belonging to various language schools, the author encountered numerous songs that captured children's interest in English vocabulary and phrases. While some of these songs had original melodies, many were adaptations of traditional songs in Japan, USA, and UK. Consequently, the author undertook the task of developing English songs using familiar tunes and shared them with a group of Japanese and Filipino English teachers who taught Japanese children. The article presents the feedback received from these teachers regarding the preference for utilizing traditional tunes and the focus of these songs. Additionally, the list of the tunes used for *Wee Sing* CD series that have been very popular among children throughout Japan and North America will be presented for further discussion.

One can reasonably assume that songs that have remained popular for many decades probably consist of elements that contribute to their accessibility and familiarity. These elements include a distinct and repetitive rhythm, as well as a melodic range that is well-suited for inexperienced singers. This paper introduces some simple and easy songs for children's EFL classrooms based on the familiar music such as melodies or tunes of English and Japanese traditional songs or nursery rhymes free from copyright. While belonging to three private language schools and two preschools in Saitama prefecture between 1997 and 2000, the author encountered many songs that stimulated children's interests in English words and phrases. Several of these

songs had original music. However, many used the melodies of traditional children's songs. Thus, the author developed some English songs based on familiar music focused on vocabulary, grammar, themes, and events, following the steps for song-creation (see Steps for Song-Creation of this article).

The paper also presents simple songs that incorporate the texts from picture books, allowing students to actively engage by singing along rather than participating in conventional storytelling. In addition, the comments on song-creation from English teachers for children in Japan as well as the tunes the university students chose for their song-creation activity will be explained. Moreover, the paper introduces a list of tunes used for the world-popular *Wee Sing* CD series. These aspects will be further explored and discussed.

Literature Review

Foreign Language Education in Japanese Elementary Schools

During the 2020 academic year, the Japanese government launched their new English education curriculum for public elementary schools. Based on the new guidelines released by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), English has become a compulsory subject for the upper grades (fifth- and sixth- grades), and English activities have been incorporated into “The Period for Integrated Study” class for the middle grades (third- and fourth-grades). In addition, reading and writing have officially been introduced to the upper grades. (MEXT, 2018)

Although the Japanese government aims to increase the number of “specialist teachers” of English, the number of these educators remains low. Moreover, the budget to hire such English professionals has been cut down in most public elementary schools. As a result, it is anticipated that English classes will be conducted mainly by homeroom teachers who have less experience in teaching a foreign language.

Applications of Songs in English Language Education

Children enjoy singing and find pleasure in learning new songs. Many of them are delighted to show what they learned in class in front of their parents later in the day (Paul, 2003). According

to one Uzbekistan teacher, “Teachers can contextualize instruction by taking the content and turning it into songs that relate to young learners’ lives” (Shin & Crandall, 2014, p. 101). Curtain and Dahlberg (2016) also insist, “Songs learned in the target language have the double benefit of giving students experience with an important dimension of the target culture and helping them to internalize the sounds, vocabulary, rhythms, and structures of the new languages” (p. 370). Other advantages and benefits of song use for language classrooms are the joy of lessons (Millington, 2011; Slattery & Willis, 2003), more cultural input (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2016; Degrave, 2019; Millington, 2011; Rockell, 2016), more variety in class (Slattery & Willis, 2003), and higher motivation (Binns, 2016; Degrave, 2019). Furthermore, vocabulary and grammar lessons (Kanel, 1997; Millington, 2011; Slattery & Willis, 2003), pronunciation and speaking practice (Millington, 2011), automaticity and memorization (Paul, 2003; Rockell, 2016; York, 2011), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Binns, 2016) are the privileges students can acquire through songs.

Suggestions for Song Creation

Traditional Songs in Japan

As western music was deliberately taught since the Meiji period, most Japanese are very familiar with western melodies. In addition, Japanese people might be surprised to discover that some of our well-known traditional songs such as *Chocho* (the *butterfly* song) and *Hotaru no Hikari* (the light of fireflies) were born in western countries. Moreover, those songs have long been believed to be Japanese original songs although they were the ‘modified’ version of the western traditional songs (Yanagawa, 2021).

Adaptation of Songs

Paul (2003) states that there are many great children’s songs teachers want to use for their classes. Thus, he encourages language teachers to modify original verses to help learners acquire more words, phrases, and expressions through songs. Abe-Ford (2001) also believes that English songs are effective for acquiring ‘natural’ English. According to her, teachers should modify verses relevant to the students’ levels, interests, and environment. *Come Come Everybody*, the popular TV

morning drama series aired on the Japanese national broadcasting network NHK in 2021, began with the opening song of their actual radio English course featured between 1946 and 1951. This popular opening song was derived from the melody of a well-known Japanese children's song called *Shoji no Tanukibayashi* [Raccoon Dogs Dancing at Shoji Temple]. In the drama, this "English" song captivated children and elderly individuals across Japan, becoming a source of encouragement and enthusiasm toward learning English during the transformative times (Come Come Everybody, 2023). In contrast to Abe-Ford (2001) and Paul (2003), some scholars, such as Kanel (1997), disagree with the ideas of adapting songs for English education. He points out that authentic songs have some mistakes, non-standard structures and vocabulary, and irregular stress and intonation patterns. Therefore, teachers should develop new *language learning* songs by themselves. Takahashi, Kawai, Sawada, and Yanagi (2021) acknowledge the importance of choosing familiar music or simple melodies for the adaptation of songs for elementary school English. Teachers should also be aware that these songs are not always easy to sing for the learners. Takahashi et al. (2021) also advocate that strong attention must be paid to the selection of songs when teaching unique sounds and rhythms that are not found in the Japanese language to teach English. According to Takahashi et al. (2021), singing with some very popular tunes would be a significant challenge for young learners to acquire *English-like* pronunciation/intonation. Therefore, those melodies would not be suitable as a teaching resource for experiencing the authentic English language. Takahashi et al. (2021) also state that it is crucial to educate learners about the distinctions in singing method, language characteristics, and pronunciation and rhythm when adapting Japanese songs or English songs in class. Consequently, it is desirable to offer instructions that can generate a sense of accomplishment among students (Millington, 2011), such as "I understood the meaning of the English lyrics!" or "I sang like an English speaker!"

Steps for Song-Creation

Songs are introduced to English classes with different purposes. For example, as background music, chanting for vocabulary exercise, using actions/gestures for review, or for code-switching. The following are the modified steps for song-creation (Shimada, 2014, p. 29) based on the ideas from Kanel (1997) and Paul (2003):

1. Consider your students levels and interests, the environment, and the lesson schedule
2. Decide your target words, phrases and grammar points
3. Brainstorm a list of simple, popular melodies
4. Create verses (with your target words or phrases) and sing along with a familiar melody
5. Revise those verses if they do not match the melody (rewording, rephrasing or using contractions effectively)

The extra step 6 such as “Create gestures to the lyrics” would also work effectively to reinforce the meaning of the song.

Difficulties of Song-Creation for Inexperienced Teacher-Singers

Based on the author’s experience of song-creation, the most significant feature of word substitution seems to be that it results in new or complex syllable groupings based on the melodies.

Types of Songs to Introduce in English Classrooms

Total Physical Response (TPR)

Asher’s TPR (1969) is a popular method for young language learners. TPR works effectively in beginners’ classrooms when checking students’ comprehension. In this theory, teachers give instructions to students, and they show their understanding with actions without saying a word. It is also possible to make the following TPR song more student-centered if the students sing in turn (instead of a teacher), swapping *color* words.

Color song

Tune: *London Bridge* (*ENG)

Who is wearing something **blue?	Something blue?	Something blue?
Who is wearing something blue?	Please stand up!/Please sit down!	

Note. *ENG means English traditional songs, and JPN means Japanese traditional songs for children. **The words can be replaced with other words in the same vocabulary group.

Simple Questions and Answers

Simple Q & A songs can easily be created based on the tunes of popular children's songs using the 'repetitive' phrases in some picture books. The story texts in *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Carle, 1970) and *Panda Bear, Panda Bear, What Do You See?* (Carle, 2006) can be sung along with the two popular melodies: *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, and the *Teddy Bear* song. Teachers can also create an easy and fun Q & A song based on the simple story of the picture book. Below the author presents two songs focusing on the story content *Pancakes* and *Acrobats*. Learning songs in the target language through picture books will give students triple benefits--- song, language, and story.

Pancakes song (based on the storybook *Pancakes, pancakes!* by Eric Carle)

Tune: *Are You Sleeping?* (ENG)

[Verse I]

Are you hungry? Are you hungry?	How about you? How about you?
Have some pancakes Have some pancakes	Now I'm full Now I'm full

[Verse II]

Pan, pan, pancakes Pan, pan, pancakes	Nice and hot Nice and hot
Add a little butter Add a little butter	Now it's done Now it's done

Can You Do This? (based on the storybook *Cornelius* by Leo Lionni)

Tune: *London Bridge* (ENG)

Can you do this difficult trick? Difficult trick? Difficult trick? Can you do this difficult trick?

“Students in turn show the trick (instead of acrobats) here!”

Yes, I can. / No, I can't. (Yes, we can. / No, we can't.)	Answer version 1
I can do it. / I can't do it. (We can do it. / We can't do it.)	Answer version 2

Topic-Based Songs

When creating songs, it is important to think about how to relate songs to students' everyday lives (Shin & Crandall, 2014) as well as to find connections with new or familiar topics (Slattery & Willis, 2003). Based on the *Influenza* song (see Appendix) which was created in 2009 when the flu viruses rapidly spread across Japan, the author modified that song to develop the COVID-19 pandemic version in 2020.

Virus Protection Measures

Tune: *Row, Row, Row Your Boat (ENG)*

- | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. | Wear, wear, wear your mask | To keep the germs away! | (Repeat verse 1) |
| 2. | Wash, wash, wash your hands | To keep you clean and safe! | (Repeat verse 2) |
| 3. | Play, play, play all day | But keep your mask on tight! | (Repeat verse 3) |
| 4. | Eat, eat, eat your lunch | But keep the chatter out! | (Repeat verse 4) |

Grammar Rules

A study of college students by Kanel (1997) found positive results when conducting song-based activities. The study concluded that songs would work as effectively as other conventional activities in language education. Many students the author taught had difficulty acquiring grammar rules. For example, young students were often confused with verbs used for sports. The song verses, therefore, were arranged in accordance with the verbs such as *play, do, skate, ski, surf*, etc. As Millington (2011) states, “By adapting the song in this way, the teacher has the advantage of being able to select a particular language feature and incorporate it into the song. This feature could be an item of vocabulary, syntax, phonology, or a simple conversational expression. This allows the teacher to incorporate more songs into a curriculum and save time searching for and learning new songs” (p. 140).

Sports song

Tune: *Are You Sleeping?* (ENG)

[Verse 1]

Let's play together

Let's play **baseball

Let's play basketball

Let's play soccer

Let's play together

Let's play baseball

Let's play basketball

Let's play soccer

[Verse 2]

Let's play together

Let's play tennis

Let's play ping-pong

Let's play golf

Let's play together

Let's play tennis

Let's play pingpong

Let's play golf

[Verse 3]

Let's do together

Let's do yoga

Let's do Kendo

Let's do Karate

Let's do together

Let's do yoga

Let's do Kendo

Let's do Karate

[Verse 4]

Let's ski and skate

Let's snowboard

Let's surf and swim

Let's roller skate

Let's ski and skate

Let's snowboard

Let's surf and swim

Let's roller skate

Seasonal Events/Cultural Input

One of the benefits of learning a foreign language is exposure to different cultures and viewpoints. In that respect, it is estimated that combining language and culture into songs can nurture children's cultural awareness and interest. Chen (2009) defines one of the merits of song use as “a kaleidoscope of culture” and states, “Language and music are interwoven in songs to communicate cultural reality in a very unique way” (p. 88). While singing the ‘World food’ song, the students will naturally encounter food from another country that they have never known before. It could be a song that arouses their curiosity about food, countries, and people. While singing the second ‘Halloween & Christmas’ song, children can experience and enjoy traditional games, and acquire seasonal greetings as well as vocabulary.

World Food song

Tune: *London Bridge* (ENG)

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Have you ever eaten **Sinigang (Filipino food)? | Sinigang? | <u>Sinigang?</u> |
| Have you ever eaten <u>Sinigang?</u> | Yes, I have. / No, I haven't. | |
| 2. Have you ever eaten Zoni (Japanese food)? | Zoni? | <u>Zoni?</u> |
| Have you ever eaten <u>Zoni?</u> | Yes, I have. / No, I haven't. | |
| 3. Have you ever eaten Black pudding (British food)? | Black pudding? | <u>Black pudding?</u> |
| Have you ever eaten <u>Black pudding?</u> | Yes, I have. / No, I haven't. | |
| 4. Have you ever eaten Vegemite (Australian food)? | Vegemite? | <u>Vegemite?</u> |
| Have you ever eaten <u>Vegemite?</u> | Yes, I have. / No, I haven't. | |

Note. **The words can be replaced with other words in the same vocabulary group.

Halloween & Christmas

Tune: *Ring-a-Ring-o' Roses* (ENG)

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| [Verse I] | [Verse I] |
| Ring-a-Ring-a Lantern | Ring-a-Ring-a Christmas tree |
| A pocket full of candy corn | A pocket full of candy cane |
| Trick or treat! Trick or treat! | Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! |
| We all get the treats | We all decorate the tree |
|
 |
 |
| [Verse II] | [Verse II] |
| Black cats on the roof | Santa with many presents (Christmas gifts) |
| Vampires in the coffins | Reindeers pull the sleigh |
| We all scream! We all scream! | We're all in bed. We're all in bed. |
| With a loud, loud voice | With sweet, sweet dreams |

Language Teachers' Preference of Music Based on the Mini-Survey and Feedback

Teachers' Preferences

The results of the mini-survey (Table 1) conducted by Shimada (2014) with 28 English teachers based in Japan show that many of them prefer to use familiar melodies of 'English' songs in their English classes such as *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, *London Bridge*, and *Bingo*. According

to the respondents, tunes of English songs are already familiar to Japanese children and easier for them to learn; therefore, it does not matter if the tunes come from English traditional songs. A few teachers responded that the students are able to relax and enjoy songs more with English melodies perhaps with a faster tempo in comparison with Japanese songs. Another reason is that because Japanese songs are unfamiliar to some non-Japanese teachers, they feel comfortable using English songs instead. There are a few teachers who do not care about the types of melody as long as the tunes fit their students' levels and include appropriate tempo and rhythm. Below is the song list the teachers preferred to apply the melody to their English classrooms. The number in brackets after the song title means the number of respondents in the survey who use that song:

Table 1

Survey of 28 English teachers' melody preferences (adapted from Shimada, 2014, p. 30)

English song name	Number of teacher's preference	Japanese song name	Number of teacher's preference
<i>Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star</i>	20	<i>Ai, Ai</i> [Monkey]	6
<i>10 Little Indians/Monkeys</i>	17	<i>Chocho</i> [Butterfly]	5
<i>London Bridge</i>	17	<i>Churippu</i> [Tulip]	2
<i>Bingo</i>	14	<i>Mori no Kuma-san</i> [The other day I met a bear]	2
<i>If You're Happy</i>	11		
<i>Are You Sleeping?</i>	11		
<i>Row, Row, Row Your Boat</i>	10		

Japanese Students' Preferences

In the 90-minute teacher education class in November 2021 and another class in November 2022, the author assigned her university students to create songs using any familiar melodies of traditional songs. The tunes they (10 pairs and 15 individuals) used for their song creation in the author's teacher education classes are as follows (Table 2).

Table 2

Tunes chosen for song creation in a teacher education class

Tune title	Number of times chosen	Tune title	Number of times chosen
<i>Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star</i>	9	<i>It's a Small World</i>	1
<i>London Bridge</i>	4	<i>Mary Had a Little Lamb</i>	1
<i>Jingle Bells</i>	2	<i>Mickey Mouse Club March</i>	1
<i>Are You Sleeping?</i>	1	<i>*The Other Day, I Met a Bear</i>	1
<i>Edelweiss</i>	1	<i>*Tulip</i>	1
<i>Happy Birthday</i>	1	<i>Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree</i>	1
<i>If You're Happy</i>	1		

Note. *Japanese traditional song

Table 2 shows the students' first choice was *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, and the second was *London Bridge*. It should be noted that there was only one Japanese traditional song, *Tulip* included in the list. Although there were more varieties in their music selection compared to the list of veteran teachers, some students were struggling to fit their original lyrics with the melodies they chose. As a result, some of their English songs were like "Japanese-English" songs. The following song is the example of this.

Christmas song

Tune: *Mickey Mouse Club March* (ENG)

December 24th is Christmas [ku-ri-su-ma-su]

Santa Clause gives [giiives] me a present [pu-re-ze-n-tou]

There are many [maaany] of Christmas food

Turkey and cakes and roast [roooast] beef

Types of Music Used for the *Wee Sing* Series

The Selection of *Wee Sing* CDs

The *Wee Sing* series have long been quite popular among children and their parents, and teachers in the United States. Many parents and teachers in Japan are also familiar with the cover illustrations of those CDs or songbooks. Table 3 below is the list of tunes used for five *Wee Sing* CDs: *Children's Songs and Fingerplays*, *And Play*, *In the Car*, *Dinosaurs*, and *For Halloween*. Some CDs including *Christmas Songs*, *Bible Songs*, *25th Anniversary Celebration*, and the *Mother Goose* are excluded as their music is basically original and due to the possibility of overlapping of the music in the selected CDs.

Table 3

List of most common tunes in the Wee Sing series and how many times they are featured per CD

Rank	Tune name (total times a tune is used)	Wee Sing series CDs				
		<i>Children's Songs and Fingerplays</i> (~55 songs)	<i>And Play</i> (~30 songs)	<i>In the Car</i> (~45 songs)	<i>Dinosaurs</i> (~40 songs)	<i>For Halloween</i> (~30 songs)
1	Ten Little Indians (6)	2	2			2
1	Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star (6)	3		2		1
2	Mulberry Bush (5)	3	1			1
2	The Farmer in the Dell (5)		3	1		1
3	Are you Sleeping? (4)	3				1
3	Battle Hymn (4)	1		1	2	
3	If You're Happy (4)	1		2		1
4	Christmas Day (3)				2	1
4	Rain, Rain, Go Away (3)	3				

The Tunes Used for Wee Sing CDs

As shown in Table 1, the most popular tunes are *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* and *Ten Little Indians*, and both melodies are used for six songs on three CDs. In the previous research with English teachers in Japan, these songs were also ranked No. 1 and No. 2. The second most popular tunes are *Mulberry Bush* and *The Farmer in the Dell*. They are used for three CDs. The third most popular tunes are *Are You Sleeping?* and *If You're Happy* (both were also popular among English teachers in Japan), and *Battle Hymn* (this melody appears twice in the *Dinosaurs* CD songs). There are 5 scale songs that are mostly used for the *Children's Songs and Fingerplays* CD songs; however, they are arranged in different ways in terms of rhythms, etc. Thus, they are excluded from this list.

Discussion

The previous research of Shimada (2014) revealed that the majority of teachers teaching English to young EFL learners in Japan preferred tunes from English songs to ones from Japanese songs. Those teachers confessed that non-Japanese instructors were unfamiliar with traditional Japanese melodies.

Similar results emerged from the song selection by Japanese university students in the author's teacher education classes in this study. Additionally, the top 3 tunes selected for the songs of *Wee Sing* series include the same traditional English songs that appeared in the two studies such as: *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, *Are You Sleeping?*, and *If You're Happy*. Millington (2014) states that many teachers are unaware of the effectiveness or potential of song use. Therefore, more teachers should use “songs as pedagogical tools” (p. 134) as he defines.

Children are fond of songs, and homeroom teachers tend to use CDs and other audio materials to teach English more frequently. Songs bring joy to the classroom and create a relaxing atmosphere. They also add variety to the everyday routine. However, there are some issues and limitations when adapting songs to class. For example, unless the teacher chooses the suitable music and appropriate tempo, the lyrics of the English song might cause students' mispronunciation and the wrong stress of English words. As presented in Japanese Students' Preferences, the *Christmas* song created by the Japanese student shows some words with extremely

long stress and voiced sound instead of voiceless sound. This might put language learners in danger of acquiring *Japanese-English* instead of natural English.

These findings suggest that more teachers should learn English songs and attend workshops to acquire skills in song adaptation.

Conclusion

As songs draw naturally on the affective dimension and emotions, it is reasonable to anticipate their potential to be adapted for presenting standard syllable stress in spoken language. “Musical elements trigger positive emotions, motivation, verbal memory, social bonding or even self-regulation, all of which are needed for the development of good language skills” (Fonseca-Mora, 2016, p. 6).

Binns (2016) emphasizes the importance of the physiological effects that music can have on individuals, suggesting that educators should carefully contemplate the music they choose to incorporate into the classroom in the future. She also states “music cannot teach students unless it is combined with suitable preparation, justification, and tasks. Music, just like any supplemental tool, can be used constructively and effectively or not: its effectiveness depends totally on the teacher” (p. 17).

The research on song use has not been examined adequately. More in-depth research and detailed surveys on song creation for young learners’ English classrooms should be conducted with larger samples. Lectures and workshops on the adaptation of songs specifically for public elementary school teachers are desperately needed. Song creation and adaptation should also be incorporated into the curriculum for university teacher candidates. Furthermore, teachers of young learners of English should make more efforts to actively introduce songs to their EFL classrooms.

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