

# Wordplay Runway: Fun with Phonology and Music

by BRITTANY GNAU

Engage students with an energetic and creative activity that seamlessly combines music, art, and language learning—perfect for fostering fun and interaction in the classroom or at an English camp. This activity serves as a lively way to review or practice using animal vocabulary following instruction, but it can be adapted for use at any time with appropriate teacher support. While it is designed for primary students, a streamlined version could captivate older learners at an upper-beginner or intermediate proficiency level. The most basic version of this activity takes about 40 minutes, although modifications, suggested below, can extend the learning much further.

A playful children’s song called “Down by the Bay” provides a fun opportunity for learners to practice rhyming and creativity. This song allows a teacher to energize a classroom or break up a lesson with interactive language practice. I remember singing this song as a child on long family road trips to pass the time and spark laughter. The song follows a simple structure: everyone sings the refrain together, and participants take turns creating and performing their own rhyming phrases. The solo aspect makes it an excellent confidence-building activity, and the collaborative nature encourages group participation.

An audio file of the tune can be found on YouTube, as it is a widely recognized children’s song. Here are the lyrics:

*Down by the bay, where the watermelons grow*

*Back to my home, I dare not go*

*For if I do, my mother will say*

*Did you ever see a \_\_\_\_\_?*

*Down by the bay!*

Endings to the song, which are based on an animal and a rhyme, are typically fun and even silly, as these examples show:

- “Did you ever see a cat wearing a hat?”
- “Did you ever see a monkey dancing all funky?”

Students will enjoy the chance to contribute their own ideas to this playful sing-along activity. Required materials for this lesson include the following:

- Lyrics to “Down by the Bay”
- Flashcards and/or other visual aids; prepared miming actions
- Paper and crayons/markers for student drawings (and possibly for teacher illustrations)
- A markerboard and a marker for teacher notes and student suggestions
- (Optional) Speakers and a file recording of the song

## Step 1: Reviewing Vocabulary and Creating Rhymes

To begin the lesson, the teacher should use flashcards to elicit vocabulary and create a running list of animals and rhyming words: *fly* and *tie*, *bear* and *hair*, *whale* and *tail*, *mouse* and *house*, *snake* and *cake*, *llama* and *pajama*, etc. Encourage students to add their own

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suggestions, including local animals and iconic items/places.

To scaffold this step, start with simple rhyming pairs students already know, then gradually introduce rhymes that are more challenging. Provide visual aids and/or gestures for students who may need extra support and model the thinking process by brainstorming aloud before asking students to contribute.

### Step 2: Teaching the Song

Next, the teacher should introduce the lyrics and check students’ understanding of meaning and pronunciation. Emphasize the rhyming pairs at the end of each line. Sing the song together several times, and make sure everyone participates in singing the key line (e.g., “Did you ever see a fish washing a dish?”). For support, and if you have access, consider using an online version of the song, such as the ones found at Super Simple Songs (2017) and TheLearningStation (2015).

Illustrating the song can enhance engagement. The teacher can do this in various ways:

- Draw or print a picture that visually represents the song’s content.
- Display a still image from a YouTube video.
- Use artificial intelligence (AI) to generate an illustration.
- Create a simple sketch on paper or a markerboard.

To scaffold student learning, break the song into smaller sections, having students echo-sing before attempting the full song. Use hand motions or cues to help students remember key words and rhymes.

This song reinforces all of the following:

- Simple sentence structures
- Animal and object vocabulary
- Verb usage
- Creative expression
- Listening comprehension
- Phonemic awareness (rhythm, syllables, stress)

Encourage students to maintain the song’s rhythm, even if their contribution does not fully rhyme. This approach helps young learners appreciate linguistic patterns and creativity. Repetition can internalize and build confidence, and it helps learners predict and understand patterns. It also highlights arrangements of rhythm, syllables, and stress. Try to keep the same rhythm and syllable structure, even if the line doesn’t rhyme—a line can still be funny and work as long as it fits with the cadence of the song. This is worth appreciating, especially with young and creative, spontaneous learners.

It could be useful to draw or print a picture of the scene that the words of the song suggest. If you are not artistically inclined, you could digitally display a photo by grabbing a still from a YouTube video.

Or you can prompt an AI engine to create one for you. See Figure 1.

There is also my preferred option of making your own simple sketch on paper or your markerboard to illustrate and bring the words of the song to life!



**Figure 1. Image created by DALL·E Image Generator, from the prompt “Please show me an illustration inspired by the song ‘Down by the Bay’”**

**Step 3: Integrating Movement and Dance**

Use simple gestures and miming to illustrate key words and phrases, such as *down by*, *grow*, and *dare not*. Then, have students work in pairs (or individually) to choose rhyming words and draw corresponding scenes, like these:

- Goats in boats
- A duck driving a truck

To support students who may struggle with creating rhymes, provide a bank of preselected rhyming words or sentence

frames they can use—for instance, “Did you ever see a/an \_\_\_\_\_ (animal) \_\_\_\_\_ (description/action)?”

In the 1970s, an American musical-variety TV show, *Soul Train*, popularized a dance line that can be used in this lesson. Students form two parallel lines and face each other. This creates a center lane between the two lines that is used as a kind of dance “runway.” Dancers at the back of the line take their turns moving up the runway and showcasing fun dance moves. Sometimes dancers move up the line one at a time, and sometimes they move in pairs. Each person gets their

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turn to dance until they reach the front of the line. Here, the dancers rejoin the parallel lines, and the next pair (or person) makes their way up from the back of the runway, showcasing their moves.

After learning the song and drawing their scenes, the class transitions to a kinesthetic activity inspired by the *Soul Train* dance line. It works like this:

- Students form two parallel lines, facing each other.
- Individuals or pairs move down the center, dancing/walking creatively. Students can incorporate “hints” about their rhyme, if they want, into their movements for an extra element of fun.
- The class sings while participants showcase their rhyming contributions and display their drawings, and the “solo artists” deliver their final line on their own.

Individuals or pairs/groups can dance/walk to the front of their lines as the group sings. They should be encouraged to try fun, silly, and creative movements as they make their way to the front. Be sure that the rhythm of the actions is clear to the students so that everyone can fully participate in the language-grounded practice without confusion.

If you are teaching primary-school students, it might be useful to practice this motion on its own, with the “Down by the Bay” song or any other song you use in your classes. Practice the movement with a familiar tune before integrating the song. I found helpful tips online (see Jordan 2023) about the etiquette of the *Soul Train* lines that can help the activity run smoothly, including the following: (a) remain in formation so that the lines stay

crisp and everyone has room to dance and see; (b) keep the lines going in order; and (c) ask students not to stop and linger too much on the runway, but to make their way to the front so that—this is important—everyone keeps moving.

Try to minimize repeats so the song doesn’t get too tiresome; if there are some repeated rhymes, maybe encourage groups to do something unique in their “dance” to help it stand out. If there are many multiples of the same rhyme, students who made that rhyme can all go together, or a team can add a fun movement or action (like pretending to be an animal mentioned in the rhyme) to make their contribution stand out. With a large class, instead of having students move down the line individually or in pairs, it might be necessary for students to move in larger groups or teams in order to save time and still make sure everyone has a chance to participate.

A nice way to end the song activity is to agree on a fun rhyme that everyone can say together. You can also conclude with a phrase everyone says at the end, such as “And that’s the end of the show!” Finally, the teacher can ask the students to do a collective motion at the end, like “Freeze,” or the class can sing one more repeat of the song with a quick fade-out, gently reducing the volume until everyone is silent and the song is over.

### **Step 4: Reflecting**

To finish the activity, consider a brief “Pass the Mic” celebration. Students sit in a circle and take turns holding an imaginary microphone (or any small object) to share a word or phrase about their experience. They might say things like “Fun,” “I liked singing,” or “Acting was hard but fun.” This quick activity encourages reflection, builds confidence, and helps students

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celebrate their participation in a supportive group setting.

### SCAFFOLDING/EXTENSIONS

This activity is flexible, and teachers can adapt it to their students' needs. Here are suggestions for variations.

#### *With younger groups*

- Simple paper puppets can enhance engagement.
- Post-song reflection can include recalling favorite rhymes or dance moves.

#### *For simplified versions*

- Students can learn the song without discussing meaning.
- Phrases can be written on cards for group guessing games.
- Flashcards can prompt a charades-style guessing activity.
- Groups can sing their phrases together upon guessing the correct rhyme.

#### *With intermediate and advanced students*

- Students can write detailed scripts incorporating their rhymes.
- Students can analyze the short verse's setting, characters, and implied conflicts.
- Highly motivated groups might create a class-wide dramatic performance that ties all rhyming elements together.
- The lesson could span two days to allow for costumes and/or props.

“Wordplay Runway” is not just about rhyming and performing—it is a fun and creative journey where students build confidence, collaborate, and bring their words to life. This dynamic, low-prep activity will have students enthusiastically creating “baboons holding balloons” and “pigs wearing wigs” while practicing English in an engaging way.

### REFERENCES

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As a former English Language Fellow (Sri Lanka 2023–2024; Tunisia 2018–2020), **Brittany Gnau** explores dynamic, student-focused teaching strategies and the power of art in language learning.