

The Use of Music in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The first section of this paper examines the physical, intellectual and emotional reasons why music may be useful as a teaching aid in the ESL classroom. Mentioned are music's links with body rhythm and Chomsky's language acquisition device, together with its function as motivator, enhancer, reinforcer, and "centre-piece for communication in the classroom, converting the laborious study of a language into a pleasurable experience" (Murphey, 1992.) The following section considers those persons—often ignored—whose particular learning styles and/or types of intelligence make the use of music in some classroom situations a definite negative influence.

A, B, C, D, E, F, G,
H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P,
Q, R, S, T, U, V,
W, X, Y, and Z.
Now I've said my ABC,
Tell me what you think of me!

—Old Song

How many generations of children have learned the alphabet by singing this rhyme?
Our parents did...my generation too...and now my grandchildren are learning their
ABC's with the same catchy little ditty. Of the mnemonics, music is one of the strongest.

If it were not so, the singing commercial would not enjoy such a place in advertising. Words set to music stick in the mind; it works for Coca-Cola—so why not for English verbs? Educators are proving that it does.

Almost any article or book that talks about music in the classroom is sure to mention its high memorability (Hubbard, et al, 1983, Murphey, 1992). Murphey notes that songs apparently work on our short and long-term memory. “It is...a common experience to forget nearly everything we learn in another language except the few songs that we learnt. For a variety of reasons, songs stick in our minds and become part of us, and lend themselves easily to exploitation in the classroom.” He adds that anything we can do with a text we can also do with songs, or texts about songs (Appendix, #1: Activity List.)

According to Murphey(1992), the singing of songs resembles what Piaget described as egocentric language, in which children talk just for the pleasure of hearing themselves repeat, with little concern for an addressee. He speculates:

It could be that the need for egocentric language never really leaves us and is fulfilled partly through song. Krashen...has suggested that this involuntary repetition may be a manifestation of Chomsky's 'language acquisition device'...songs may strongly activate the repetition mechanism of the language acquisition device. It certainly seems to do so with children, who learn songs almost effortlessly (Murphey, 1992.)

Often mentioned is music's close link with body rhythms. The author of the best-selling *The Mozart Effect* believes that it stimulates cerebral development too (Campbell, 1997). Other research indicates there may be a biological imperative for music behavior: cells have been found in the auditory cortex that seem to process specified harmonic effects (Suzuki Music Academy, 1994). As to the link between music and language, a study by Lamb and Gregory points to a link between pitch

awareness (musical sound discrimination) and reading ability in first-grade children, perhaps by improving the phonemic stage of development (Lamb and Gregory, 1993).

However it may work, music is easily observable as a motivator and enhancer, a reinforcer, and a centre-piece for communication in the classroom, converting the laborious study of a language into a pleasurable experience (Murphey, 1992.)

The Mozart Effect and other copycat books have created a furore over music as healer, tranquilizer—what-have-you. Howard Gardner's identification of musical intelligence as one of the basic eight, has focused attention on music in a new way and helped bring it into vogue as a classroom tool (Gardner, 1983). There is an abundance of information and resources available for students of all ages: e.g. Millie Grenough's beautiful *Sing It!* series (Grenough, 1995), *At the Chalkface* (Matthews, Spratt and Dangerfield, 1985), and *Recipes for Tired Teachers* (Sion, 1985).

Personally, I enjoy using my skills as a music professional to prepare special materials for my students. Also, I like preserving the 'play' aspect of music, so choose to use it less as an overt grammar-teaching tool. Sneaky me! Shall I tell my students they are getting new vocabulary, listening comprehension, practice in sentence structure and word order, drill in stress-timing, and repetition of grammatical structure? No! Let them think they are having a time-out when I bring in my keyboard and sing Beatles songs with them! (Appendix, #2: Songsheet). As Mary Poppins said, "Just a spoonful of sugar..." Non-performer teachers might use commercial CD's and tapes, ask a friend to record accompaniments, or look for a student who plays the guitar. It doesn't have to be professional quality—just fun! Also, I learned when studying songleading that it's sometimes an advantage for a leader to have a so-so singing voice: people aren't intimidated, so they join in fearlessly.

A favorite music-supported exercise involves stream-of-consciousness writing. Ss listen taped thunderstorm with touches of music and write down whatever goes through their minds—words, colors, impressions—without trying to shape it into

sentences. This helps Ss get in touch with their feelings and forget their fear of writing in English (lowered affective barrier). Ss share what they have written with the class. Always unique, always moving, always beautiful! A lovely side-effect is the bonding that occurs as Ss share deep feelings. Some people tap into deeply personal things, so I never ask anyone to share if he/she doesn't want to.

Songs put Ss in touch with English-speaking cultures, as well as providing a conversation topic. Last St. Patrick's day I wrote the words to "Danny Boy" on the board, and we talked about who the speaker might be, and why Danny might be going away; we discussed the potato famine in Ireland, deportation, the crime of teaching children to read and write...a look at Ireland's history.

Thanksgiving and Christmas are natural times for singing and talking about the meaning of songs in the culture—with a nice dollop of reading-comprehension/pronunciation and conversation practice at no extra charge! It's a party!—a break in the routine—which refreshes us for attacking subsequent work with new vigor.

Devoting the last half-hour to singing in a three-hour Saturday class for young children, once helped us survive a scorching desert summer. I wrote humorous songs capitalizing on the children's enjoyment of the ridiculous and the "yukky" (Appendix, #2: Children's Songs). All too worn out to sit still, we did lots of motions with the songs: clapping, drumming the rhythm on our desks, even singing while marching over the classroom and schoolyard. The chant *In the Trash* underlined positive ecological values. Sometimes Ss helped make up songs. Never mind if they weren't great musical works! We had fun, and Ss were learning. (To teachers who would like to try something similar, but feel afraid or embarrassed: Go for it! Enjoy! Children are not a critical audience.)

Song lyrics have provided a natural vehicle for acquainting Ss with the 'thee, thou, thy, thine' forms in English. My students have been excited to learn that English

possesses such second-person pronouns. I don't ask them to use the forms, but they like being able to recognize them (it seems slightly exotic), and understand their use in poetry, song lyrics, prayer, and such.

People who know me as a music professional will be surprised to hear that I never use background music while Ss work. I use music in many ways, but I never use it as a background for other activities in the classroom. This is because for me, the term *background music* is an oxymoron. No *music* is *background* for me. If it's music, it's foreground. It pulls me, demands my attention. Maddening distraction!—like trying to listen to two people talking at once. I would go mad in a *Suggestopedia* classroom!

In spite of all the present emphasis on individuality (different types of intelligences and learning styles), when I mentioned that some of us are *allergic* to background music, I found that nobody (teachers, educators) could/would hear me. (Because we hear what we expect to hear?) People assumed that since *background music is good for everybody*, then I could not be saying *it's bad for some of us*. I know that many people benefit from music playing as they study or work, but I was convinced that not all do. I wondered if there were others who have the same problem with background music as I do. I decided to find out.

I began by interviewing some of the people I know who are either professional musicians, or non-professional/music-lovers/supersensitive to music. Some people believe that people who are “music-smart” (Gardner, 1983) all like to have music playing constantly (Appendix, #3: Survey) I'm just starting this investigation, but the preliminary sample (Appendix, #4: Survey Sample), although limited, indicates the presence of another point of view: the extremely gifted may find background music for study or conversation, competitive and distracting. One student, an actress/singer with extensive training in the arts, told me she feels it rude not to give her full attention to any music that may be playing. Obviously, background music in the classroom is not helpful to her.

One man I interviewed, a composer, said, "I never listen to music; I have my own [interior] music." A student told me of trying to work: "I found myself tapping out the rhythm of the background music on the keyboard. Instead of writing." Another said, "I'm so glad you told me you can't work with music playing. I thought there was something wrong with me [because I can't]." Still another man said, "If I were trying to work, and there was Mozart playing, I just would not get anything done! I'd be pulled by the music, and pulled by the work, and I wouldn't be able to do either." What these people are saying is, "When I listen to music, I want to give it my full attention. When I work, I want to work. But not both at the same time." I'm not saying we shouldn't use background music in the classroom; but I am saying that before we put the tape or the CD on, we should find out if there's someone who finds background music, as one woman said, "like Chinese water torture."

I think Gertrude Moskowitz had the right idea. She used music for ambiance, but was careful not to let it become a disturbing element (Moskowitz, 1978). I think that's wisdom.

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