“Using Song to Enhance Learning in the EAP Classroom”

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Introduction

Music can be used as a teaching tool in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classroom to improve second language acquisition. Research in language learning theories, psychology, neurological science, and musicology in the last two decades has shown the effectiveness of joining music to language learning. Previous research has focused on the use of music in language classrooms for younger students, particularly in the primary and junior educational settings, where results indicate a strong correlation between music integration and many aspects of language learning. More recently, studies have begun to examine the effects of a music component in adult second language programs, and this has led to some initial attempts to link the two disciplines.

This interdisciplinary paper synthesizes some of the most important articles which make a case for a music centred approach to second language acquisition. It provides a discussion of the specific benefits of including a music component in an EAP program, and ideas for incorporating musical activities into lessons. Finally, the appendix includes a list of suitable songs and resources, and several lesson outlines for using music to teach grammar, vocabulary, speaking skills, reading skills, and writing exercises.

Background

Globalization and multicultural policies have resulted in many changes in the educational landscape of Canadian universities. International students arrive here from a wide variety of countries, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds. Their abilities in communicating successfully in English in an academic setting vary considerably, and this results in many students requiring further instruction in English as a second language. Many universities and colleges offer language upgrading through “English for Academic Purposes” (EAP) courses for international students to enable them to reach an academic level in their communicative skills as efficiently as possible.

Students are assessed with standardized English testing materials and placed in a class level appropriate to their language skills proficiency. They come into the program highly motivated to complete these EAP levels quickly and move on into their undergraduate (or graduate) programs. Often this is a stressful and academically challenging time for them. Long hours in the classes, frequent testing components, and the realities of life in a different country and culture away from family and familiar surroundings, can create less than optimal learning conditions. Evidence shows that music can enhance language learning through the improvement of the learning environment, creating a more relaxed and confident student. This enables students to focus and perform verbally with more motivation and
involvement with the learning materials. Musical experiences reinforce learning in complex and comprehensive ways, improving integration of language skill areas through communicative and interactive experiences.

Research

Previously, there has been little experimental research on music and second language learning, especially at the adult level. This is changing, particularly with the advent of neuroscience’s brain-based research involving new measurement tools such as the PET (Positron Emission Tomography) scan. Results indicate that central features of music and language are close to each other in the human brain and share features of a “grammar” that orders music and language elements similarly (Maess, Koelsch, Gunter, and Friederici, 2001). Benson’s work (2003) as a cognitive scientist shows music and language’s discrete elements combined in hierarchical sequences which “serve as foils for each other.” She also describes the rhythmic contours of a song that often match the natural stress patterns of spoken English, other aspects of music and language similarities, and the logic of incorporating these two areas.

Lowe (1998) demonstrates the high correlation between scores obtained by students receiving second language and music study compared with students who did not study music. In terms of what inspires learners, the “highest correlation between enjoyableness and effectiveness of all the activities was for singing an English language song” (Green, 1993).

Arnold and Fonseca (2004) examined Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory (MIT) and its applications to language learning. They affirm the development of musical intelligence in the second language classroom as having benefits such as helping students to concentrate and connect with the inner self, stimulating creative processes, eliminating distracting sounds, and fostering a productive classroom atmosphere. They also address the logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, and interpersonal frames, which all play an integral role in the production and comprehension of musicality and communication. The authors stress the importance of engaging “multiple memory pathways necessary to produce sustained, deep learning.”

Butzlaff (2000) analyzed a set of twenty-four research studies focusing on the relationship between music instruction and performance in reading. A meta-analysis of correlational studies demonstrated a strong and reliable association between music programs in schools and reading ability. He suggests that these results indicate the value of developing curriculum materials which would provide a sustained application of musical experiences over the course of a language program.

Humans are a musical species no less than a linguistic one (Sacks, 2007). The author examines themes of music, movement and memory in relation to conditions such as music and Tourette’s Syndrome, aphasia and music therapy, and music and amnesia. This work demonstrates a strong link
between music and memory. Music is valuable in assisting in the triggering of recall, applicable to several areas of language learning including vocabulary, phrasing and pronunciation.

Research into evolutionary development of humans, and infant/parent communication patterns demonstrates that music is a foundational human activity which can be compared to language. Vanoucheete and Skoyles (1998) argue that song is the basis for the development of human language, and that song production and song interpretation capacities were essential preadaptations which enabled language to develop in a cultural manner. Children learn spoken language by means of innate melody recognition capacity. In other words, language learning devices can then be seen as memetically adapted song learning devices. Trevarthan and Malloch (2009) use the term “Communicative Musicality” (CM), to describe the intrinsic organizing principle of healthy parent-infant interactions. CM facilitates turn-taking, regulates the pitch contours of vocalizations of both parent and infant, and inflects the timbre of vocalizations. These non-verbal patterns are referred to as “protoconversations” which appear to be a kind of musical game. These games provide an important part of cultural learning, which becomes an essential beginning to the awareness and learning of natural, conversational language.

Advantages and Benefits

Studies have shown that language students rate “singing an English song” as the most enjoyable class activity above all others. Its value is obvious as a motivational technique in an EAP program with its long class time requirements. Instrumental music can also provide a calming atmosphere. It can be classical music, or any other kind of music that students might choose, with a relaxing, positive style.

Many linguistic features that can help second language students are present in songs: they contain many common, short words and many personal pronouns. The language is conversational, with many imperatives and questions. The lyrics are usually sung at a slower rate than words that are spoken, with more pauses in between the phrases. This provides easier recognition and pronunciation of new vocabulary and grammar forms. There is usually a repetition of vocabulary and structures. The high frequency lyrics allow for extra practice, without the boredom of regular drill.

Three linguistic features always present in song include rhythm, stress and intonation. The rhythmic contours of a song usually matches the natural stress patterns of spoken English. This certainly assists students in developing their oral expressiveness through natural practice.

Folk songs and national music can provide vehicles for cultural learning. Many texts used in EAP programs contain units built around themes of human relations, ethics, customs, and history. Songs can also enhance English study of universal themes of love, courage, equality, dreams and aspirations.

Adult listeners bring a “rich frame of reference” to music experiences (Lems, 2005). This allows language learners to interact with the emotions and concepts contained in the lyrics and melody lines in meaningful and rich conversational exchanges and in writing exercises. Listening and responding to lyrics can assist in bypassing small talk, and, like poetry, move more directly towards deeper thoughts.
and feelings. This can foster a second language learner to begin to develop an esthetic sense of the English language, which is often less available to them in a conventional curriculum.

**Guidelines and Tips for Effective Use of Song in an EAP Classroom**

These suggestions reflect a compilation of ideas from the author’s own reading and teaching experiences, and research from several second language instructors who have written articles about their own extensive teaching careers using various integrated musical experiences in their language classrooms.

Some general guidelines to consider for implementing music:

- Be sure that lyrics are clear and loud enough for hearing without straining. They should not be buried in the instrumental accompaniment or rhythmic background.

- Carefully assess the vocabulary level of the lyrics so that they are an appropriate match to the specific EAP class proficiency level - with a moderate degree of “stretch” to challenge but not overwhelm the learners (Vygotsky, 1978).

- Carefully screen the song’s lyrics for appropriate content in terms of cultural sensitivities, paying particular attention to the specific variety of cultures and belief systems represented within the class. Use common sense.

- Use shorter, slower songs for beginner level students, moving gradually toward longer, faster songs with fewer high frequency vocabulary items. Higher level learners can benefit from songs with more of a complex story line within the lyrics.

- Encourage participation by including music from genres that students express an interest in. Again, screening for appropriate lyric content is essential.

- Encourage participation by presenting music in a relaxed and natural way. (Even if you are not confident of your own singing skills, you can very effectively use recorded materials from cd’s, youtube videos, etc.). Most students will participate at whatever level they are comfortable. Sometimes this can be just listening, learning, and toe tapping. Many will enjoy singing, especially if they come from cultures where musical performance/production is a more integral part of life. Many cultures enjoy karaoke, and this experience can be utilized effectively to practice oral production of English.
• Pick songs that you yourself enjoy. Your interest and enthusiasm will be transferred to the students, and the lesson will be more successful.

• Musical experiences need to be related specifically to language concepts being taught. They can be used to introduce new learning, to practice the concepts, and to review previous learning.

More specific suggestions for relating musical experiences to language learning skill areas include:

• Choral or individual reading of lyrics of songs, providing support for and reinforcement of reading skills and pronunciation

• Songs which tell a story can be retold to practice narrative/speaking skills, or written out to develop summarizing skills.

• To reinforce reading and writing skills, students can complete response sheets and answer questions about the featured topics, something new they learned, something they enjoyed.

• Other reading and writing activities can include fill-in-the-blanks, jigsaw puzzles. Ex) Words can be deleted to practice a target grammar point. Cut lyrics into lines and have students work in groups to arrange order.

• Students can do a “free-write” in response to listening to a descriptive piece of orchestral music, such as Tchaikovsky or Moussorgsky, (which they may or may not be familiar with) to try to express feeling or describe an interior picture of what they think the music is portraying. This can also be done in a more structured piece of writing, at the sentence or paragraph level. Beginner level students could follow a template to assist with grammar and structural forms (Lems, 2005).

• Students can prepare presentations based on composers or specific compositions, to practice research, summarizing and writing skills, as well as speaking and responding to oral questions.

• Have students rewrite their own lyrics based on a song. This could be a group project in class, where students can practice using the grammar or vocabulary being targeted.

• At lower proficiency levels, students could pantomime some of the actions being presented in the music, for listening comprehension skills.

• Provide lyric sheets prior to listening to work on reading comprehension, vocabulary, or targeted grammar forms.
Conclusion

Though there is beginning to be an increase in the number of studies which point to the benefits of linking music to second language acquisition, it is still a challenge to locate specific materials which have been developed to build on this natural synergy between the two disciplines. This is starting to change, particularly for the younger language learner. For the adult learner, the concept is still quite new, particularly in the university/college setting. There are probably several reasons for this late development.

In some ways, the arts are still seen as less necessary to “serious” learning, and therefore don’t receive the same level attention when curricula for second languages are being developed. Often, musical topics are included in ESL textbooks, but it is not given a prominent or consistent place in any comprehensive approach to teaching second language (Lems, 2005). Though music is popular addition to language classes, there has not been a concerted effort to incorporate into an second language program.