

Using Music in the University EFL Classroom

Daisuke Akagi

Abstract

The field of Teaching English as a Second or Other Language (TESOL) has spawned a vast array of educational methods as well as textbooks that are based upon them. One approach that holds particular promise is that of involving music in the process of teaching EFL classes with children, adolescents and adults. This paper takes a closer look at this idea, first by focusing on the so-called “musical” aspects of the English language. Second, it discusses some of the advantages of using music to teach English, especially for university students including adults. Finally, specific ideas for classroom activities are described and evaluated.

Key words : EFL, music, university, classroom activities, prosody

1 . Introduction

The relationship between music and language has been a topic of discussion among teachers, linguists and philosophers for centuries. In recent years it has also become a topic of interest in the scientific community. Of particular interest to EFL teachers is the notion that experience with music could somehow assist or support what they are trying to accomplish in the classroom. This paper is written with the idea that one common element of language and music—rhythm—deserves much closer scrutiny in this regards. Special attention has been given to the rhythmic systems of English and Japanese.

2 . Musical elements of the English language

2.1. Stress accent vs. pitch accent

In comparison with the Japanese language, English needs a beat. This observation is based on the fact that English employs stress for its sense of temporal organization, whereas Japanese employs pitch. And because of the basic differences between speaking a stress-timed language and a pitch-timed language, Japanese EFL learners have tendency to be unaware of the characteristic rhythmic patterns of natural English speech. English prosody requires that the more important syllables of a word as well as the more important words of a sentence be stressed and delivered in a slightly louder voice. When combined with the varied intonation patterns of English, the result is a constantly shifting soundscape that has much in common with music (Kubozono & Mizokoshi, 2000, p.97).

By way of contrast, the Japanese language tends to maintain a fairly equal sense of length

and volume for each mora, and their relative importance is marked by pitch rather than stress. Moreover, the structure of each mora is quite different than English syllables in that they consist either of a single vowel (V), two vowels (VV) or a consonant and vowel pair (CV). This creates a strong sense of two beats in repetition (Kubozono & Mizokoshi, 2000, p.40). The options for English syllables are much more varied with multiple consonants before and after a vowel all being possible.

2.2. Rhythm

The flexible aspect of rhythm in a stress-timed language such as English results in there being a basic background pulse created by the stressed syllables of the content words. As more syllables are added, the background pulse stays the same while individual words and syllables accelerate in order to catch up with the main beat. This can be a very difficult concept for Japanese EFL learners to understand as well as a difficult skill for them to master. A recent study by Tierny & Kraus (2013) has shown that there is a strong correlation between a person's rhythmic sense for music and the efficiency with which his/her brain processes the sounds of language. They also suggest that participating in musical activities that emphasize rhythm may improve reading skills.

One way to overcome these difficulties is through music since the melody of English songs relies on the stress of a musical downbeat, the first beat of each bar. According to Kubozono & Mizokoshi (2000, p.118) the downbeat of each bar of an English song receives what are known as content words, the nouns and verbs and other important words that carry the main meaning of the lyrics. The weaker beats of each measure contain the function words such as articles, prepositions, conjunctions and similar parts of speech.

3 . Effectiveness of music for teaching university EFL classes

3.1. Rationale

A major difference between song lyrics and other types of translations is that melody and rhythm are involved. At first this might not seem like such a difficult task, however song melodies and their rhythms are known to contain a trace of the language of the original text and even the first language of the composer (Patel, 2008, p.78). This means that even though the lyrics are translated, the melody keeps some prosodic features of the original language. In this section, some prosodic differences between Japanese and English are discussed in terms of lyrics translation and the use of songs in more than one language for EFL study.

3.2. Memorable input

Today many people listen to music while commuting. Some like to listen to western pops in English, and the melody and rhythm can help them to memorize the words and experience English prosody firsthand. If they happen to especially like the song they may also find themselves singing a phrase or two on the street or in the shower. Frequent listening and repetition is a good way to rehearse English prosody, and songs make the process of repetition

pleasurable. Further research needs to be done to determine whether listening to music does indeed improve prosodic competency.

3.3. Affective filter

It is interesting to note that, while Japanese people are very enthusiastic about singing karaoke, this enthusiasm does not carry over into English language education. Krashen's concept of affective filter is very important to the understanding of this phenomenon, and perhaps finding a way to remedy it (Krashen, 1985, p.44). As language learning can be very stressful and make students nervous about getting the right answers on difficult entrance examinations, singing songs in EFL classes can be a way of lowering the affective filter and dissolve whatever may be standing in the way of students getting the most out of the learning experience.

3.4. Motherese : infant-directed language

The phenomenon of infant-directed language or "motherese" has been documented in many different countries and cultures around the world (Kuhl, 2000). The basic concept at work here is that caregivers who have no specialized training in the theory of language acquisition quite naturally exaggerate the prosodic features (especially pitch and rhythm) of their native language as a way of making it more attractive and effective as children are in the process of language learning. In a way, speaking motherese is like singing. Kuhl has proposed that hearing songs in a second language might have a parallel effect for adult second language learners.

4 . Application of these ideas to the classroom

4.1. Singing vs. listening

The main obstacle to implementing music-based EFL activities with university students that involve singing is quite simply getting them to sing. Numerous writers over the years have supported the common wisdom that, while getting children to sing in English class is a cinch, from adolescence on, young people are reluctant to sing in public and prefer simply to listen to songs in class rather than sing along (Jordan & MacKay as cited in Murphey, 1990, p.190). While this shyness may largely be due to peer group psychology, it is also a part of the larger issue of Japanese English education system having centered on the translation method for so long. Students are accustomed to having a silent relationship with printed texts rather than reading them aloud, and they likely transfer this preference to the situation of songs and their lyrics as well.

4.2. Solution

Although the full benefit of song-based EFL activities comes from listening and singing, there are some things that can be done to ameliorate the situation. One is to create listening activities (e.g. cloze, choose words heard from a list, dictation, etc.) that are done while listening to a song in class. After the correct text has been established the students can then be asked to say the words in the rhythm of the song, perhaps at a slower tempo at first, then along with the

recording. This method retains many of the benefits of singing but circumvents the non-participation problem that arises from students being unwilling to sing in front of their peers. Basing their work on Chafe's (1988) concept of covert prosody, Downing, Ina & Noonan (1992) have suggested that oral reading of texts is an essential part of developing greater linguistic proficiency. Covert prosody, the aural image of how a spoken text "sounds" to our "mind's ear" as we read silently. Although actually singing a song would be ideal, reciting the lyrics aloud as a group and then individually can still have many of the same benefits as long as rhythm, stress and intonation matters are kept as high priorities.

4.3. Materials

Browsing the catalog of most EFL/ESL textbook publishers will yield one or more examples of books that touch on the topic of music in some form or another. In terms of a guide for teachers who want to incorporate songs into the university EFL classroom the best resource remains the Oxford Resource Book for Teachers *Music and Song* (Murphey, 1992). Based on the author's doctoral research and extensive classroom experience, the book provides both a survey of the theoretical and practical aspects of how music can be integrated into many different classroom settings and for various educational goals.

4.4. Song types

Of particular interest is Murphey's list of the main types of songs that are most useful for the purposes of teaching EFL classes (p.152). They are as follows: (1) made-for-EFL songs, (2) Traditional and folk songs, (3) Contemporary songs and (4) Student selected material. The following comments put each of these categories in context.

4.4.1. Made-for-EFL

The best point about songs that are especially written for EFL use is that they usually have a particular teaching point in terms of vocabulary, grammar or the like. The downside can often be in the quality of the music as well as the musical idioms employed since they are usually written by teachers rather than by professional musicians. The most successful songs of this are usually ones intended for classes with children.

4.4.2. Jazz chants

A parallel type of material in this category is that of the jazz chant, "a rhythmic expression of spoken American English" (Graham, n.d.). As with the suggestion above to read lyrics aloud, the process of learning, memorizing and reciting jazz chants has many of the advantages of singing songs even though they lack melodies. One good point about using this approach is that teachers can easily learn to create their own original jazz chants that reinforce certain teaching points of ongoing lessons, and also work in topics of current interest to students at a given time and in a certain place.

4.4.3. Folksongs, traditional songs

Moving on to the topic of pre-existing folksongs and other traditional songs, this type of material requires considerable preparation on the part of the teacher. While some folksongs

from English speaking countries are famous around the world, others are not. Moreover, the topics, obsolete vocabulary and obscure regional references can take considerable time to explain to the students. While this can offer some good teaching points in terms of cultural and historical matters, it can also be very time-consuming. On the positive side, the tunes and rhythms are often attractive and easy to learn and encourage group singing.

4.4.4. Contemporary songs

The use of classic rock ‘n’ roll and pop songs by groups from the 60s, 70s, and so forth such as the Beatles, the Carpenters, the Bee Gees, Simon & Garfunkel have a long history of use in the EFL classroom. The good news is that the melodies and words are often well known to students of all ages because so many of the songs are used in TV commercials and department store background music. Moreover, as they are included in the songs available on most Japanese karaoke machines, students can then experience singing them when they go to karaoke. Beyond singing, reciting, and other activities, the lyrics can also be used as starting points for writing assignments or presentations. This type of song can also have some overlap with the next category by doing a class survey of rock, pop and other types of singers and groups from English speaking countries with which the students are familiar.

4.4.5. Student-selected songs

The final category of student-selected songs has the advantage of higher motivation by asking the students to contribute songs that they would particularly like to study. The most difficult part of this approach is what to do when the songs the students contribute are rife with obscenities, portrayals of violence, racism, etc. In that case perhaps it is best simply to view it as an opportunity to teach such aspects of contemporary culture as the boundaries of free expression and censorship.

4.5. Example of a prosody-based learning activity

This idea is based on the task of discovering which words fall on the downbeat of a song. A good example for this activity is to use the song “The Rose” sung by Bette Midler (see Fig. 1). The first step is to teach the students to conduct a “four-four” pattern so they can get a physical sense of upbeat and downbeat. Next, they are asked to conduct as the recording is played and to discover which words fall on the downbeats of the melody. They should notice that the same words are repeated every four bars (e.g. Group 1 “love”) to understand the

Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4	
love	し (さを)	river	流す	drowns	愛	reed	川
love	し (いを)	razor	裂く	leaves	愛	bleed	ナイフ
love	(とめ) どない	hunger	(渴) きが	end-less	愛	need	けれど
love	は花	flower	花	you	(きみ) は	seed	種子

Fig. 1 The song “The Rose”

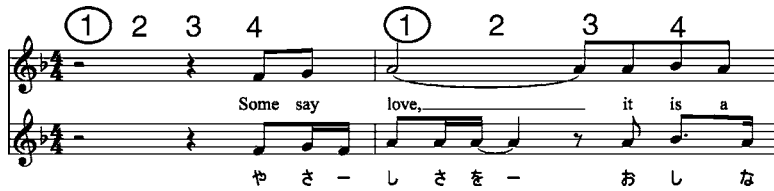


Fig. 2 English & Japanese lyrics compared with the same melody

rhythming patterns. The last step would be for them to indicate whether the words should be classed as “content” or “function”. Since the words that fall on the downbeat often contain important keywords, this activity can help them guess the story behind the lyrics.

A good spinoff activity would be to follow the same steps with the Japanese cover version of this song and to note how the concepts of content/function words, stress, rhyme and so forth are not present in this version of the lyrics. Another aspect of prosody to focus on is how the Japanese translation requires extra notes (rhythms) to be added to the melody to accommodate the extra words (see Fig. 2).

Finally, a replacement exercise could involve taking a song and extracting one characteristic phrase of the melody. The next step is to ask the students to replace the existing lyrics with words of their own. For example, the phrase “Some say love” can be replaced with other one-syllable words, or they can try to fit in two- and three-syllable words to see how the words need to fall according to the accent rules. The various new snippets of text would next be sung to the original melody and then evaluated and discussed by the class for how well they fit the rhythm, stress and melodic shape.

5 . Conclusion

This paper has dealt in short order with a vast topic, that of using employing music as a tool for teaching English as a foreign language. Special emphasis was placed on the role of rhythm in language and how English and Japanese differ with this regard. In addition, it has been suggested that the study of songs that have been performed in both English and Japanese versions holds some special clues to helping students experience and understand these differences.

Works cited

- Chafe, W. (1988). Punctuation and the Prosody of Written Language. *Written Communication*, 5(4), 395-426.
- Downing, P.A., Lima, S.D., & Noonan, M. (1992). *The Linguistics of Literacy*. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing.
- Graham, C. (n.d.). Jazz Chants. Retrieved September 27, 2013, from <http://jazzchants.net/what-is-a-jazz-chant>

- Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypotheses : Issues and implications*. New York : Longman.
- Kubozono, H., & Mizokoshi, A. (2000). *Eigo no hatsuon to eishi no inritsu* [*English pronunciation and prosody of English poems*] (5th ed.). Tokyo : Eichosha.
- Kuhl, P.K. (2000). A new view of language acquisition. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 97(22), 11850-11857. doi:10.1073/pnas.97.22.11850
- Murphey, T. (1990). *Song and music in language learning : An analysis of pop song lyrics and the use of song and music in teaching English to speakers of other languages*. Bern, Switzerland : Peter Lang.
- Murphey, T. (1992). *Music and Song*. Oxford : OUP.
- Patel, A. (2008). *Music, language, and the brain*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Tierney, A., & Kraus, N. (2013). The Ability to Move to a Beat Is Linked to the Consistency of Neural Responses to Sound. *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 33(38), 14981-14988.