Improving the Perception and Production of English Prosody of Japanese University EFL Students through Jazz Chants

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Abstract

Jazz chants have been used as a way of improving English speaking fluency and listening skills since the early 1980s. Chanting and singing activities provide EFL students with direct experience of the musical elements of the English language thus helping them improve their communicative abilities. Ways of using jazz chants in the classroom, as well as examples of chants, are introduced. Research reviews are examined not only about Japanese students but also concerning other Asian countries with similar educational environments. Applied examples are also shown as a suggestion of how jazz chant can be used as supplemental activities.

Key words : jazz chants, oral fluency, listening skills

1. Introduction

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education has continued to develop in many ways, though there is an even greater need today for finding practical means for students to improve their speaking and listening skills for the sake of communication. Japanese students tend to have less confidence in their speaking and listening skills since the English educational system in Japan has traditionally emphasized the grammar-translation approach (Dwyer, & Heller-Murphy, 1996). One way of improving students' oral fluency is a learning activity known as "jazz chants." In the late 1970s, Carolyn Graham introduced the use of jazz chants as a way of working on such matters by having young students sing and chant for communicative improvement. Since that time other EFL educators have expanded this methodology for teaching university students and adult language learners as well (Kung, 2013; Schulman, 2004; Somers, 2000).

The following paper examines the current situation of jazz chant activities and their use in addition to introducing the current author's exercises done in the classroom.

2. Jazz chants

Jazz chants were invented by the American second language educator and musician Carolyn Graham who has published a series of textbooks to introduce jazz chants. Jazz chants can be either in the form of a song in which the words are sung to a simple melody or in the style of a

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chant in which words are spoken rhythmically with to a steady musical beat. Exercises such as these are powerful tools for enabling language students to experience the prosody of English language, especially stress and intonation. The textbook *Small Talk: More Jazz Chants*（Graham, 1986）includes a variety of topics based on daily conversation appropriate to adult second language learners. Other examples of Graham's publications contain material suitable for younger learners. For example, the topics of the songs and chants in the *Let's Chant Let's Sing* 1（Graham, 1994）textbook include greetings, friends, weather, and animals that children can enjoy just for fun.

　Japanese university students lack extensive conversation-related activities since English is used primarily as a school subject for the purpose of high stakes testing. Moreover, since their English study is a part of formal schooling, they miss the younger years of learning the language at home like a native speaker. In a way, jazz chants can fulfill the role of replacing this lost period of time in their early language development. Zhang（2011）has summarized the reasons jazz chants are effective: chants allow students to practice stress and rhythm, they can be implemented as a pair work with high motivation, they are simple and repetitive, and they involve physical movements such as hand clapping and stomping（p. 564）. Jazz chants have also been shown to serve as a valuable tool for teaching pronunciation to Japanese university students. Schulman（2004）has created original chants that employ such relative topics for job hunting by students majoring in Engineering, Architecture, and Information Technology as can been seen in the following excerpts from his article:

　Example 1 : The Job Interview, IT students, Intermediate

> I want a job, I want a job!!
> Salary, bonus, no reason to sob!!
> Tell me your story, and make it fast,
> Why should you work here, why will you last?
> …
> To everything, yes, I must say it's all true,
> Look at my resume, it's here and it's new.
> I see you know C, and Java and Perl,
> Fortran, Pascal, and HTML.
> 　　　　　（Schulman, p. 119）

　Example 2 : The Job Interview, all technical majors, beginner

> It's nice to meet you.
> It's nice to meet you.

What was your major?
What was your major?
My major was Mechanical Engineering.
（Schulman, p. 120）

A major benefit of the chanting such phrases is that they offer a way of experiencing rhyming words. This can also be an opportunity for the instructor to do explicit teaching about rhyme in the English language. Also, it can be observed that Schulman effectively integrates vocabulary related to specific university majors in his chants so that the students can acquire the words for speaking usage. Another benefit of using chants lend themselves to being repeated more often than other forms of textbook content. Japanese university students taking EFL classes need to exercise the mouth movements necessary for speaking the English language for better articulation in general. Since the Japanese language is spoken with much smaller mouth movements than English, Japanese EFL students tend to keep the same style when speaking English（Ohta, 2004）. Chanting is like a game and icebreaker thus their mouth movements and facial expression can be used more suitably. Repeating some phrases is also an important way to feel the meter of the words as in the example "What was your major?" that is used twice. From this, the students can capture the sentence more like a chunk of sounds with beats instead of just reading written statements.

3. Related Studies

Students from other Asian countries have similar difficulties in acquiring the sound system of the English language. Somers（2000）has conducted a research project in South Korea at two universities noting that the English education system there has tended to utilize the grammar-translation approach similar to the situation in Japan（p. 117）. Her case study was conducted with a group of 22 college students（17 females and 5 males）in one classroom. Some questionnaires were used as a qualitative investigation as shown below:

1. Has your listening comprehension improved after taking this course?
2. Has your pronunciation comprehension improved after taking this course?
3. Has your conversation skill improved after taking this course?
4. Were the English lessons useful?
5. Were the English lessons interesting?

Each question had high positive responses（Q1. 81%, Q2. 91%, Q3. 64%, Q4. 91%, Q5. 100%）consistently. She also clarifies criteria of songs selections which are good guidelines of how to select songs for students.

1. Slow rate or pace

2. Clear articulation of vocabulary

3. Use of high-frequency vocabulary

4. Repetitive lyrics

5. Well written and as representative as possible of standard, spoken English

6. Attributes that embraced and reinforced the curricular values and themes

7. Short sentences with syntactic simplification

8. Characteristics that demonstrate age appropriateness for the student population

（Somers, p. 64）

In another research project conducted in Asia, Kung（2013）studied Taiwanese students who were usually taking English grammar-oriented for the purpose of improving test scores. Similar to the situation in Japan and South Korea, such classes in Taiwan ordinarily lead to low communicative ability. Kung studied 30 students（19 females and 11 males）throughout a 12-week course with teaching that met for three hours each week for a total of 36 hours. He used jazz chants as a warm up activity which lasted about 20 minutes each time. The instruction was mainly mimic-based with no detailed grammar or sentence structures. His well presented qualitative and quantitative results are summarized in these three points:

1. Jazz Chants not only improved EFL learners' listening but also speaking skills.

2. Music was found to complement well with Jazz Chants to strengthen EFL students' learning interests and motivation.

3. The use of Jazz Chants could give students more confidence in speaking English from the authentic input they received during this study（p. 18）.

Comments received from interviews conducted by Kung are also a significant source of the student attitudes about the jazz chant activities. For example, one student reported, "I think I am more confident in speaking English in public after learning Jazz Chants and how it could be used to improve not only my pronunciation but also intonation"（p. 14）. Feelings of inferiority about their English pronunciation also gives students less confidence, a factor that applies to Japanese students as well. Jazz chants give students more exercise and loosen the negative thoughts of pronunciation problems.

4. Practical implementation

The current author has also conducted informal research with jazz chant exercises in classes taught with sophomore students at Nihon University School of Dentistry in Tokyo. A designated textbook was used as the primary source of teaching material, and the section employed in the research is based on dialogs for dental related topics. In the following two examples, the first

sentence is taken exactly from a textbook. Just by reading aloud, this sentence gives simple rhythmical pattern of English accent, and was converted into a jazz chant:

Slide the floss between your teeth and move it gently toward your gum.
（Williams, Langham, & Inoue, p. 20）

This example also has the rhythmic character of shuffle triplet beat pattern. Eve（2004）has noted that the rhythm of the Japanese language has a negative transfer for EFL learners in Japan who tend to speak English with two-beat（duple）rhythm pattern when encountering the three-beat（triple）patterns of English（p.183）. In the following example used in the current author's dental classes, triplet beats are emphasized while chanting:

Slide the floss between your teeth and move it gently toward your gum.							
Slide	floss	-tween	teeth	move	gent-	t'ward	gum.

The bottom row shows the more strongly-accented syllables that consist mainly of the content words of the sentence. The presentation method utilized a drum beat played with a smartphone app to enable the students to practice repetitively by themselves. In general, students seemed to have fun of doing the activity. The following week an individual recitation test was conducted to see how they memorized the sentence with capturing the accent patterns. Some had difficulty to keep the rhythm and a duple pattern was heard from their utterance instead of triplets. Overall, this activity was a great way of creating a good atmosphere in the classroom. Hand clapping was suggested while speaking, but this seemed more difficult as it added an extra task.

A second example is also a sentence selected by the teacher for a similar jazz chant activity. The selection was made because of the simple patterns of beats contained in the sentence. With this chanting, a 4-beat drum sound was used, and stronger beats are visually emphasized with bigger dots. In addition, Japanese pitch accent was explained to show differences of the language prosody characters.

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Is there anything I can do to prevent him from getting tooth decay?
（Williams, Langham, & Inoue, p. 31）

Again, students generally had better motivation and interest level than normal recitation and following week they all had individual speech test. At the final class of the course, simple questionnaire with Likert scale was conducted with a Google form. Two questions out of 20 are related to these activities.

Q1. I was able to acquire English accent through this course.

Q2. I was able to acquire English rhythm through this course.

Each question had these five choices:

SA (strongly agree), A (agree), N (neutral), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree).

These are the percentages for 134 students responses for each question.

Q 1 : SA 6.0%, A 48.5%, N 35.1%, D 5.2%, SD 5.2%.

Q 2 : SA 14.2%, A 51.5%, N 23.9%, D 7.5%, SD 3.0%.

Q 1 has 54.5% which is 73 students and 65.7% which is 88 students out of each 134 as a group for SA or A choices. These questions did not mention specifically about the activities explained above, but obviously, the percentages were higher than D and SD total. Above all, these types of activities function as a game that offers supplemental practice in oral fluency.

5. Conclusion

Second language educators in Asian countries continue to seek better methodology for the communicative side of English education. Jazz chants offer one possibility to achieve a higher student motivation factor with a flexible variation of topics. Although singing and chanting has been perceived as being more common with young learners, some investigations have been done by researchers in South Korean and Taiwan as well as Japan. The use of jazz chants was received favorably in all cases, including those implemented by the current author in his informal research. Furthermore, the effects of jazz chants should be investigated more closely and introduced as a way for teachers to create output skills activities. Finally, a valuable outcome of such research would be to compile and publish a collection of jazz chants especially created for Japanese university students and developed as ice breaking or supplemental material for working on communicative skills improvements.

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