Rhythm, music, and young learners: A winning combination

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Most teachers who teach English to young learners utilize rhythm and music to some degree. How many of these teachers, however, are aware of the many benefits of using songs and chants in the classroom that go far beyond basic enjoyment? Music and rhythm are powerful aids to language learning, memory, and recall. Witnessing repeated and consistent learning linked directly to music and rhythm alerted me to the fact that there was something substantial and important happening in the classroom. This paper traces my path from those initial observations to identifying the reasons for that learning and finally to writing songs and chants utilizing knowledge discovered in the classroom. The role of rhythm and music in teaching young learners is discussed and suggestions for teaching and selecting effective musical materials are given.

若年層に英語を教える殆どの教師は、リズムと音楽をある程度指導に活用している。しかし、どれほどの教師が、歌やチャンツが教室にもたらす、基本的な楽しみを遥かに超えた多様な利益を認識しているだろうか。音楽とリズムは、言語学習、記憶、記憶の呼び覚ましを強力に援助する。筆者は、音楽やリズムが直接的に学びを促進する事象に繰り返し、かつ一貫して触れることにより、教室での実質的で重要な出来事への関心を持つようになった。この論文は、筆者の初期の観察、学びが起こる理由の考察、さらに教室で得られた知識を活用した歌やチャンツの制作について議論を提示する。また、若年学習者指導におけるリズムと音楽の役割、指導法、音楽マテリアルの効果的な選び方についても議論する。

At a workshop, I once asked a group of language teachers to join me in singing a song that I knew they had never heard before. The exercise revealed a lot about what all of us seem to know about the nature of music and songs—in minutes, most participants were singing along cheerfully. When the song ended I complimented them on their singing and asked how many had heard the song before. They all looked around the room and were amazed when they realized that none of them had ever heard the song before, yet, as a group of strangers, they had instinctively figured out how to sing it during the first listening. I then asked them to retrace their thinking and the process they had gone through in decoding the song and collectively they generated a list of song features that included:

- an introduction, a melody that repeats;
- a verse/chorus shape or song framework;
- a chorus section that repeats;

- melodic leading tones that take us to the verse or chorus;
- rhyming, rhythmical and lyrical patterns.

Coming from a singer-songwriter background, it was natural for me to blend music and language teaching—we do what we know. My rationale for utilizing music at the start was on more of a surface level than from any underlying conviction I held for how I could instil language learning through music, yet on that level alone there was an endless list of good reasons to use music with young learners.

In every culture, there exists a vast collection of music, songs, and rhymes specifically for children. The early years are filled with music and for many this music seems to be associated with childhood itself. I have noticed that there is almost a tacit understanding, among the adults of the world, that music and children go together. Why do we use so much music with children? My guess is, just because it works. Like the group of language teachers mentioned above, children are also sensitive to those mnemonic qualities of music. That begins the story of why music can be used to such great advantage in the language classroom.

Children worldwide are used to music—songs and music can give children an instant feel for and sense of a new language which might be very different from their own language. Even in a second language where words are unfamiliar and meaning may not be immediately apparent, there is melody to hear and rhythm that they can feel and respond to which offer them a place to start. Kolsawalla (1999) states that normal English is characterized as "stress-timed," highly regular in its rhythmic patterning as the time intervals between the stressed syllables tend to be equal. We are fortunate that English has this rhythmical, musical feel which makes it easy and natural to use musical methods in the ESL classroom.

Just clapping or moving to a song in a foreign language gives the teacher and the young learner a place to begin. Rhythm provides a natural bridge to movement or Total Physical Response (TPR)—involving the child on a physical level. Action songs take learning to a new level and move learning into the physical realm where students can feel the input as well as see and hear it. TPR enables new concepts to be taught through the body. Students soon realize that they can make the connection between new language and meaning without translation or explanation by the teacher (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004).

The classroom allows children to sing as a group. Group singing unites us, reduces barriers to communication, and builds community in the language classroom. Children can hide vocally in a group while they adjust to the sounds around them and make decisions about the new language. Making a choral melodic response can lower the affective filter and make singing as a group easier (Fonseca Mora, 2000). Within the security of a group, children can hear the sound of their own voices in a foreign language, privately, before they are called upon to break their silence in speech.

But I realized there is even more to it than this. Teaching children started me thinking about the hundreds of songs I had memorized in my touring repertoire when I was singing full time and about how much language that represented. Funny, I don't remember memorizing all those songs, at least not working very hard at it—so how did that happen? Sacks (2007) explains that it is difficult to hold a lot of information in our mind "unless we use mnemonic devices or patterns—the most powerful of these devices are rhyme, meter, and song" (p. 237).

So, from personal experience with the power of music and the opportunity to see how young learners respond to musical material, I realised that music holds great promise for teaching English to young learners, particularly at the input stage. The way I view classroom music today is vastly different from when I first started teaching. There is much, much more happening in a musical language classroom than I ever imagined. In this

paper I will focus on some of the key features of rhythm and music that I have discovered at work in my classroom and will endeavour to communicate my understanding of how music and rhythm benefit language learning, offer some suggestions for how teachers of young learners can use rhythm and music to advantage in the classroom, and suggest what to look for in selecting appropriate and effective classroom materials.

Discoveries from the classroom

Rhythm

The significance of rhythm became apparent to me when I began teaching English to large classes of elementary school children. Through exaggerating the rhythm and trying to speak clearly, my utterances took on a musical feel and the students instinctively responded, giving me valuable information as to how I could manage the teaching of large groups efficiently. "By making the rhythmic articulation of the utterance more exaggerated, the intonation becomes more musical" (Fonseca Mora, 2000, p. 150). As I noted the ease with which the rhythm moved the students as a group, I leaned more and more to a musical approach. Sacks (2007) lends support to my observations by saying that rhythm has a binding effect on us as it is "not only heard but internalized identically, in all who are present" (p. 244). He further states that rhythm synchronizes the brains, minds, and hearts of all participants to the music, and the group resonates as one—"It is very difficult to remain detached, to resist being drawn into the rhythm of chanting or dancing" (p. 245).

There is a distinct rhythm in speaking English and this is central in the work of Carolyn Graham, the originator of *Jazz Chants*. Jazz Chants are rhythmic expressions of natural language (Graham, 2006) and are effective in illustrating and practicing the rhythm, stress, and intonation patterns of American English. Graham explains that although it's fun to move a chant into music, "the point of the Jazz Chants is the rhythm, which links to the brain and to memory" (p. 7) and that link can be taken advantage of whether the words are chanted or sung.

I use chanting when introducing lexical chunks or commonly used phrases in large classes. I favour "call and response" or "question and answer" patterns as they work well in groups and there is an unlimited list of possibilities for content, for example:

▲ ▲ ▲ ▲
What | a - ni - mal | do you | like?

▲ ▲ ▲ ▲
I like | pan - das | *Clap!* | *Clap!*

Note: ▲ = a stressed syllable

These simple chanting exercises are also invaluable for illustrating and practicing the stress and intonation patterns inherent in English. The meter and rhythm patterns within the phrases act as a framework into which the students can later drop words or phrases. The length of the phase can literally be felt through strong and weak (stressed and unstressed) syllables and the associated physical sensations suggest a framework that listeners can actually feel, giving them sensory information about the length of the utterances, which acts like a nudge to come in and a signal to stop. This helps keep the class moving and avoids those uncomfortable silences when children are not quite sure when to respond. I have been pleased to observe that once students have rhythm etched into their minds at the input stage and through the many group repetitions that follow, their

solo speech and output maintains that same rhythmical feel. My recording of *The Little Foot Dance* is an example of rhythmical phrases in use (see Appendices).

There is a bonus in using chanting in Japan as it seems to almost eliminate *katakana English* pronunciation from the start. Katakana pronunciation results when Japanese pronunciation patterns are applied to spoken English, many times rendering the speaker incomprehensible. With chants, there is simply no space for extra katakana syllables in the rhythm.

Rhythm can also be extremely helpful in teaching that involves developing motor skills for very young learners. In my preschool classes I discovered a way in which to help the children grasp the concept of using scissors. By holding my hand over the child's hand and chanting "open, shut—open, shut—open, shut" as we cut, the children get a sense of the cutting motion and are soon able to cut on their own. Similarly, when teaching early writing, I found that chanting the strokes for letters over and over as the students write in time, either on paper or in the air, can anchor a sense of the letter shape and stroke direction. When teaching *o*, we chant "around and around and around and around" while the children write in rhythm. With *d*, for example, we chant "around and down, around and down, around and down" as the students write.

From this section you will understand that by *rhythm*, I mean the regularly timed, predictable patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in speech and song. In the following section I will focus on *melody*, which I define as a succession of notes or sounds arranged to form an idea or phrase. We call this melody in music and *intonation* in speech. In order to avoid any confusion, it is important to note that although discussed and treated separately, rhythm and melody work in tandem and are inseparable in terms of their mnemonic function in language teaching—any overlap is therefore to be expected. "The more rhythmic and intonated the utterances we teach are, the more holistic the learning will be. By focusing on rhythm and intonation we help our students to take in the new utterance as a gestalt" (Fonseca Mora, 2000, p. 151).

Melody

I regularly keep a teaching journal and a key entry alerted me to the power of melody in language learning. I was using a segment of the *Rainbow Song* (see Appendix 2) with a class of 6-year-olds. Weeks later, as a recycling exercise, I held up the rainbow flashcard and asked, "What's this?" There was complete silence and intense concentration until I chanced to hum the song whereupon the students chorused "rainbow," much to their relief and to my great surprise. I often see students singing the *Days of the Week* song to themselves in class in order to recall a specific day. Melody seems to be the most reliable mnemonic available for this kind of recall by storing specific information in a way that the students can access at will. Fonseca Mora (2000) recognizes singing as an easy way to remember things, that music leaves particularly deep traces in our memories and that "melody seems to act as a path or a cue to evoke the precise information we are trying to retrieve" (p. 150).

Cope and Cope (2009) also noticed the way in which words to a song are instantly cued by a familiar melody and are sung silently inside our heads. Stevick (1976) confirmed the role of familiar cues and "association" in human memory when he said "things that are stored together tend to be recovered together" (p. 18).

We have all experienced having a song or particular melody going around and around in our heads. Murphey (1990) addressed this in his paper entitled "The Song stuck in my head phenomenon: a melodic Din in the LAD?" He believes that a song repeating in one's head has value for language learning in the way that it resembles inner speech or involuntary

subvocal rehearsal generally believed to be associated with deepening learning. Sacks (2007) calls these little musical repetitions "brainworms" and says that certain music, in particular commercial jingles, is written with the intention of imprinting melodies on the mind of the listener and "hooking" them. Cope and Cope (2009) have also confirmed this kind of brain activity to be a "powerful learning tool" (p. 729).

My teaching journal provides clear evidence in support of the fact that things learned through music are easier to remember and recall. I noted an instance where there was significant difference in the time it took for my 6- and 7-year-olds to learn the songs and their speaking parts for the school concert. The full songs were learned with ease but even the very short speaking parts required extensive rehearsal. This suggests that music offered support for learning, perhaps found in the melody or other patterns inherent in music that the simple spoken text did not have.

With very young learners, melody helps to catch their attention and I find it effective to sing, or intone, basic classroom instructions in rhythmic or melodic phrases, particularly at first. By singing "everybody sit down" or "everybody stand up" the children automatically associated my musical phrases and actions with meaning. As the melodic scaffold was no longer needed I could take out the actions, gradually remove the musical elements, and reduce the exaggerated intonation of the phrase until just natural spoken language remained.

By providing students with well chosen material we can give them handy guides which they can carry in their heads for quick reference, similar to the way in which native English speakers rely on the ABC song to remember the letters of the alphabet. Also, a catchy, melodic phrase, with language attached and circulating in a child's head, can help compensate for a lack of exposure to the target language outside of class.

Repetition

Repetition is one of the key characteristics of speech that mothers, caregivers, and teachers employ when speaking to babies or very young learners. This speech is called "motherese" or "mother talk… parental talk or caretaker talk and is highly repetitive" (Fonseca Mora, 2000, p. 149). Immersed in their native language, children are bombarded daily by repetition, rhythmic patterns, patterns of intonation, and lexical items. Children in an EFL environment are underexposed to the target language and therefore deprived of the repetition needed to form their theories of how the language works and how to go about learning it. Fonseca Mora believes that music can partially compensate for this void in the way that it stores the appropriate foreign sounds in the memory so that they can be accessed for subvocal rehearsal.

Music by nature is repetitive—there is repetition in the melody, the lyrics, the rhythm, and in the verse and chorus structure. Repetition is important in the learning process but drilling and rote learning are tedious. Using music removes the tedium and enables us to reap the benefits of repetition with the bonus of involving other parts of the brain in storing the information, thus making it more easily available for instant recall.

Classroom songs revisit the children regularly and set up *internal* involuntary repetition or subvocalization, which at times becomes quiet *external* vocalization. It is common to see children sitting or playing quietly and singing little songs to themselves. Parents also tell me that their children sing English chants and songs at home. One such song is *The Manners Song*.

The Manners Song
Written by Laurie Thain

Here you are, thank you, you're welcome
Here you are, thank you, you're welcome
Here you are, thank you, you're welcome
Stamp your feet and turn around

The melodic simplicity of this tune, combined with the rhythm, actions, and pure repetition, makes it easy to learn and easy to assign meaning to and it also lends itself nicely to private repetition, which in turn anchors and strengthens learning. I teach this song from the centre of a circle with a basket of balls and the children standing facing me. I hand a ball to each child, in turn, as we sing "here you are, thank you" and "you're welcome" in time with the music and in sync with the actions. After three refrains we all sing "stamp your feet and turn around" and start all over again. The song loops and can continue until all the children have a ball, at which point we reverse direction; the children hand me the balls and we continue until all the balls are back in the basket. This song works best with very young learners but elementary school students can benefit as well from listening to the simple lyric and frequent repetition.

Children are pattern seekers

Music is a rich source of patterns and children naturally seek patterns in connecting new learning with old and attaching meaning to new experiences.

> One of the most important points about the brain and learning is the fact that the brain's search for meaning occurs through patterning. The brain looks for patterns as it organizes information according to schematic maps and categories. As the young learners in language classes search for meaning in the experiences we provide for them, we must be sure to create complex, meaningful experiences from which they construct their own patterns of understanding. (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004, p. 7)

> Music can be used to anchor learning, and to cue or prompt recall in many ways through the use of melody, rhythm, rhyme, repetition, and in essence, the use of patterns. Songs are easily remembered and are therefore an excellent means through which to provide young learners with lexical patterns and chunks of language that will be stored in their minds and that can be easily retrieved for future oral interaction (Fonseca Mora, 2000, p. 151).

I have melodic and rhythmic patterns to thank for getting me through a section of visual pattern recognition in the pre-math workbook that I taught to my class of 4-year-old kindergarten students. The children were to look at a repeating pattern of coloured shapes and to choose the next shape in each pattern.

For example:
Yellow circle—red square
Yellow circle—red square
Yellow circle — _____.

I chose to teach this exercise though music and was astounded to see how quickly the children were able to understand the concept when guided by melodic and rhythmic patterns attached to the visual patterns. We sang the colour and shape of each item in the pattern in order and where the pattern items on the page stopped, I stopped singing. The children kept going

as a group and automatically sang and identified the logical next item. Everyone got 100% on that page and we finished the whole thing in about 5 minutes.

Singing as warm-up for the task of speaking

Singing is a way for children to get a feel for the language through musical vibrations, imitation, experiencing new rhythms, and experimenting with making new sounds. New sounds means new mouth shapes and that requires the involvement of different muscles. I insist that you cannot make a "new sound" with an "old mouth shape." In singing English songs, children are subconsciously experimenting with new mouth shapes and warming up the muscles they will eventually need for speech.

Choosing musical materials—things to keep in mind

I have identified some of the main features of rhythm and music which I believe to be effective in language learning and have outlined some of the ways in which I put these features to work in the classroom. It can, however, be daunting at first when introducing songs and chants into your lessons and there is a wide range of musical material to choose from. I have therefore included this section to help get teachers started.

1. Be careful to choose songs that are interesting, memorable, and appealing. A successful classroom song is no different than a commercial hit song or an advertising jingle—it must be "catchy." There must be rhythmical, melodic, and instrumental "hooks." which are fun for our ears, and make us want to hear that song over and over again. This is the vital repetition that strengthens language learning. As well as feeling fresh and new, the song must also have a vaguely familiar feel which connects us to the song subconsciously as something we have heard before and want to hear again. There is a reason why so many children's songs have been written around tried-and-true melodies like, *Oh, My Darling Clementine, London Bridge is Falling Down,* and *Frère Jacques*—they are simple, familiar, infinitely recognizable, and memorable.
2. Songs that are "conversational" in nature are good choices for the language classroom. The phrasing, intonation, and common features of everyday conversation can all be found in vocal music, making it an excellent vehicle for language teaching. English lends itself beautifully to musical treatment. Musical phrases are a powerful way to demonstrate, anchor and reinforce lexical chunks, common phrases, sentence patterns, questions, responses, and expressions in the language classroom. Songs that feel and sound conversational are ideal for the classroom as they transfer easily into speech.
3. Choose musical materials that are age appropriate and the right level for your students' abilities. A song must be accessible to students, musically and otherwise. Children know when a song is suitable for them and will invest themselves wholly in a song that is right for them. Complicated melodies, difficult or meaningless words, and long convoluted sentences are just plain hard work and learners can tune out and shut down!
4. Songs must be meaningful. Choose songs that children can understand. Look for songs that deal with topics that are relevant to young learners so that the learning can be internalized and incorporated into their life learning. I avoid most old traditional songs and nursery rhymes as those songs are filled with irrelevant foreign references and antiquated language that the children will never need or even encounter in the real world. Nonsense songs are not my favourite choice

either. Although they can be fun and often good for pronunciation, I feel that when we have the children's attention, teaching nonsense songs is a wasted opportunity.

5. Think about patterns when you choose songs. Choose songs that repeat often and have short, easily remembered lines. Songs that make use of echoing, where the teacher sings a line and the children sing exactly the same thing in the next musical phrase, provide a safe and predictable way for children to join in. In addition, echoing provides students with an immediate pronunciation model. This, by the way, was one of the things that made it easy for the teacher-students, in the workshop that I mentioned at the start, to learn the song we sang together. Another pattern that works well in the language classroom is a "call and answer" pattern in a song—one group or perhaps the teacher will sing a question and the others will respond with the answer. Songs with simple predictable rhyming patterns are also important for young learners as rhymes act as cues in facilitating initial learning and function as mnemonics in recalling the song in the future.

Finding the right material for your students depends on many things, takes time, and involves a lot of trial and error, but the benefits of getting it right are well worth the effort. Happy faces, total involvement, a buzz in the classroom, and a lot of involuntary rhythmical movement will signal you that the songs and chants you have chosen are working and that your students are engaged and learning. If you happen to miss the signs, don't worry… the children will ask for their favourite songs over and over again!

Conclusion

Language learning through music involves many parts of the brain in a complex and overlapping mechanism that is not yet fully understood. However, I have seen enough to know that the benefits are real. Just like with gravity, I don't need to know how or why music works to evoke those benefits in the classroom.

Patel (2008) reminds us that interest in the relationship between language and music dates back more than 2000 years to the time of Plato and through history has been of interest to a diverse group of thinkers, including philosophers, biologists, poets, composers, linguists, and musicologists. He speaks of the new concepts and tools now available that will advance suggestions and analogies about the language-music relationship to empirical research—a journey that has just begun. As technology evolves, neurologists trace brain responses, and linguists and developmental psychologists test their theories, I'm sure that science will eventually tell us the reasons underlying what so many language teachers already know about rhythm, music, and young learners. In the meantime, I encourage teachers to make a commitment to using carefully chosen musical materials with their young language students. In doing so, your students will benefit from proven pedagogical principles plus those unexplained mysteries that are surely there, quietly working in our favour.

The classroom is a daily source of inspiration and surprise for me and fertile ground for future song ideas. My beliefs about music and language learning have evolved naturally through days spent watching and listening to young learners—it is they who have taught me never to underestimate the power of music!

Bio data

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Appendix 1

Audio files

The Little Foot Dance and the previously mentioned *Manners Song* were both recorded by the author of this paper and can be heard by visiting <purepacificmusic.com> and searching under the title of this paper "Rhythm, music, and young learners: A winning combination."

Appendix 2

Song lyrics

The Little Foot Dance, adapted by Laurie Thain from a traditional children's song

Put your little foot
Put your little foot
Put your little foot right in

Put your little foot
Put your little foot
Put your little foot right out

Walk and walk and walk and walk and turn
Walk and walk and walk and walk and turn
Walk and walk and walk and walk and turn
Walk and walk and walk and walk and turn

Now everybody in and everybody out, and let's make our circle again.

Put your little hand
Put your little hand
Put your little hand right in

Put your little hand
Put your little hand
Put your little hand right out

Walk and walk and walk and walk and turn
Walk and walk and walk and walk and turn
Walk and walk and walk and walk and turn
Walk and walk and walk and walk and turn

Now everybody in and everybody out and let's make our circle again.

Rainbow Song, by Arthur Hamilton
(This is the only segment of the Rainbow Song that I used)

Red and yellow and pink and green
Purple and orange and blue
I can sing a rainbow,
Sing a rainbow,
Sing a rainbow too