

Music and MEXT: How songs can help primary school English teachers teach and their students learn

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With the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) recently introducing new guidelines regarding English education at the primary school level, primary school teachers find themselves at an important time of change. Unlike secondary schools, which may have multiple specialist English teachers, primary schools may have one, or, as in the majority of cases, no specialist English teaching staff. According to the MEXT (n.d.) guidelines, it is the role of “homeroom teachers” (students’ everyday teacher, not a specialist English teacher)—who may have low English language ability, as well as no experience in teaching English—to teach English to their students. However, without presuming that homeroom teachers are incapable of teaching English to their students, the current paper explores how the use of songs can be considered an important aid in helping both non-native teachers teach, and their students learn in this context.

This paper is designed to provide practical ideas regarding the use of songs in the Japanese primary school EFL context. However, the theoretical grounding behind such ideas is also presented. Following this, concerns and considerations when using songs as a source of language are presented. Songs that complement the MEXT model syllabus are selected and a number of song-based activities designed to improve listening and speaking skills are introduced. The advantages of using the selected songs and activities from a teacher’s standpoint are also considered. Finally, a conclusion highlights the paper’s findings.

Keywords

young learners, music, MEXT, Eigo (English) Note

In this paper, I address Japanese primary school teachers who may find themselves having to teach English for the first time as a result of MEXT’s plan to introduce compulsory English education in primary schools nationwide. I propose that using music and singing in such contexts is beneficial for both students and teachers. For students, I argue that music has positive effects on lowering the affective filter, provides the opportunity to practice pronunciation, can help improve acquisition of the target language, and can assist in the development of automaticity. For teachers, the paper provides practical lesson ideas separated into speaking and listening language skills. I also provide an overview of how specific songs may be incorporated into the fifth-grade English syllabus proposed by MEXT.

文部科学省による学習指導要領改訂で、公立小学校における外国語活動が新設され、初めて英語を教えるという小学校教師が多いと思われる。本論では、そんな小学校教師への提言を行う。そのような場面では、音楽や合唱が児童にも教師にも有益である。音楽は学習者の情意フィルターを下げ、発音練習の機会を与え、目標言語の習得に好影響があり、automaticityの養成にも役立つ。教師にとって実用的な授業のアイデアを、スピーキングとリスニングのスキル別に提案する。また、特定の曲を題材に、文科省の第5学年のシラバスへの取り入れ方も提案する。

Literature review

MEXT foreign language education guideline

MEXT updated the national primary school education guideline in 2006 with the initiative of introducing 70 hours of English over grades five and six (10-11 year old students). This initiative has been put into practice nationwide since March 2009. The objective is to foster speaking and listening skills, using English as the medium for purposeful communication. The keyword “communication” appears twice within the main objective, and other key points of the guideline suggest that communicative activities should be used where possible (MEXT n.d.).

Rather than following a MEXT-prescribed model syllabus, schools are to establish their own appropriate English education syllabi based on the circumstances of their students and local communities. MEXT is however aware of the difficulties that teachers face in creating their own syllabi and has produced a model syllabus, accompanying student workbook, and teacher’s manual for both grade levels. Even assuming that teachers will not implement every lesson from the provided teacher’s manual, Medgyes (1986, p. 110) writes that textbooks ensure “a great deal of linguistic safety” for non-native teachers and thus it is a fair assumption that they may emulate the model syllabus, and rely on at least some parts of the student textbook in their English lessons. The current paper is based on this assumption, and aims to show how songs can be implemented to enable teachers to introduce English in a student-centered, meaning-focused classroom environment.

Reasons for using songs in EFL classrooms

From young learners to adult learners there are ways of including songs into lessons according to the linguistic ability and interests of students. Children are particularly receptive to sound and rhythm, with musical intelligence appearing early on in their intellectual development (Davies, 2000). This provides enough of a reason to include music and songs in the classroom; however, Schoepp (2001) researched reasons for including songs in EFL classrooms and concluded that teachers use songs based on

theoretically grounded affective, linguistic, and cognitive reasons.

In his Affective Filter Hypothesis, Krashen (1982) claims that if the affective filter is high, learners will not seek language input, and language acquisition will not occur. The affective filter can thus be described as student apprehension or anxiety towards learning, and lowering this filter has been deemed important in fostering a positive attitude towards learning in students. The casual nature of learning through singing can help promote a productive atmosphere in class, lowering the affective filter and in turn increasing the potential for language acquisition.

Linguistically, songs provide learners with a chance to hear informal or colloquial English that they may encounter outside the classroom. Songs such as those in *Jazz Chants* (Graham, 1994) are rich with alliterating phrases, which can be used to encourage *noticing* of particular phonemes, and to refine students’ pronunciation. As an example, *Mary Had a Little Lamb* can be used for /l/ sounds and *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* for /r/ sounds; a point particularly significant in the case of the present study, as Japanese English learners struggle at differentiating these two phonemes (Thompson, 2001).

Cognitively, songs have been linked to the development of automaticity in students, which is the ability to know what to say and be able to say it without pausing. Automatisation was traditionally thought of as an element of fluency developed through rote learning. However, with the worldwide shift towards teaching methods that emphasised communication from the 1970s, automatisation was to be developed through different activities (Schoepp, 2001). Songs can be considered a useful tool for developing automatisation in communicative contexts due to their repetitive nature, and ability to be worked into communication-based activities.

Similar to how Asher’s (1969) Total Physical Response (TPR) links physical responses to linguistic components, the strong rhythmical element of songs makes acquisition of the language easier than trying to remember a spoken version. Murphey (1990) notes that songs have the ability to get “stuck in one’s head”, a phenomenon where one continues to sing a song

long after listening to it. This phenomenon in conjunction with the rhythmical and melodic elements of music can help students to memorize linguistic properties of the language. Furthermore, incorporating gestures and actions into songs can make them even more meaningful and enjoyable.

Criticisms of songs in EFL classrooms

While there are strong, theoretically grounded reasons for using songs in primary school settings, there are several criticisms. The nature of the language used in songs is not always a realistic model of useful discourse – e.g. some songs are repetitive, word order is sometimes distorted to fit the rhyme, and intonation is often distorted to fit the melody of the song. Advice is to use songs as an introduction to new vocabulary and grammatical items, but to not dwell solely on the notion of English as a song. Instead, a focus on songs as a reference to the target language during post-singing activities is recommended. Using the language from songs in communicative activities can help support students' language acquisition.

Application of songs and activities into MEXT's model syllabus

An overview of MEXT's model syllabus for fifth grade students is shown in Table 1 along with the target language for each topic.

Topic No.	Target language
1	Greetings.
2	Greetings and feelings.
3	Numbers.
4	Expressing preferences.
5	Polite requests, negative statements, and possession.
6	Polite requests.
7	Interrogative clauses.
8	School subjects and days of the week.
9	Asking preferences.

Table 1. MEXT model syllabus for grade five students

This paper concentrates on activities that improve student speaking and listening skills for two reasons: (a) due to word-limit restrictions on the paper, (b) to comply with MEXT's decision to focus on these two skills at the primary school level.

Listening skills

An activity presented by Hill-Clarke and Robinson (2003) can be used as a lesson or topic starter to help students link emotionally to songs. The activity requires students to draw pictorial representations of how each of a variety of musical styles makes them feel. Benefits include lowering the affective filter, and vocabulary acquisition. This activity can help teachers deepen their connection with students.

Listening activities linking TPR methodology to songs are frequently used in primary school settings, a typical example being *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes* where students touch the relevant part of their body as words are introduced. A follow up listen-and-do activity is typically a *Simon Says* game, where students obey commands given by the teacher or other students. Getting students to remember a sequence of body parts in a memory game can expand this activity even further. Having the vocabulary introduced through songs and linked to gestures means that teachers can concentrate on managing the game.

Subsequently, an activity that facilitates the acquisition of specific vocabulary items requires students to listen to a song and mark a worksheet each time a predetermined word appears. At the end of the activity the teacher replays the song, confirming the number of times each item appeared. Asking students to listen out for several words or full sentences can further expand this activity. With a lyrics sheet available in most CD covers, teachers have quick access to the answers.

Giving students the task of rearranging a number of illustrations of a song that is still relatively new to them increases student focus on song's contents. Similarly, exposing students to a song and then performing a true-false test based on the contents can help achieve an increased focus on language components. True-false tests also expose students to question formation in English, and asking students to create their

own questions can be used to further improve language acquisition. Using songs as a source of language means that teachers do not have to produce sample sentences themselves. Creating a true-false test can be as simple as changing one word in a line of a song.

Speaking skills

Songs previously learned can be revived by asking students to create their own version. As a concrete example, the song *Do You Like Broccoli Ice Cream* (Super Simple Songs 2, 2006) can be adapted into an activity where students make their own version of the song, and then teach this version to other groups. A parody of this song can be created by easily using the *Karaoke Version* of the song on the CD. Using such techniques, teachers or students can insert their own unique foods instead of the original lyrics.

The act of singing is inherently connected to pronunciation practice; however, it is important to increase awareness of pronunciation features using focused activities. *Old McDonald* can be used both as a listening activity asking students to listen out for instances of vowel sounds, but more importantly to help with student pronunciation. As mentioned in the literature review, *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* are considered particularly useful in the current context for practicing /l/ and /r/ sounds. For non-native teachers who may have as much difficulty as their students in pronouncing certain phonemes, the native-speakers in songs provide an accessible model of correct pronunciation.

Songs can be used as the basis for role-play activities. Examples include *How much* (Genki English, n.d.) and *Put On Your Shoes* (Super Simple Songs 1, 2005). In the case of *How Much*, gestures and actions could be added to the lyrics before being performed. Subsequently, the song can be rewritten with purchasable items and prices replaced with alternative, topic-appropriate vocabulary. Finally, a skit or role-play can be created that is independent of the original song.

Songs and activities for the MEXT model syllabus

Table 2 outlines how songs and the aforementioned speaking and listening activities may be

implemented into each topic from the MEXT English syllabus based on the target language from Table 1.

Topic No.	Supporting songs	Activities
1	Hello Song (Apricot)	Greet classmates while the song plays.
2	If You're Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands. (Apricot)	Make a new version of the song including different emotions and gestures. Teach the new version to other students.
3	One Potato, Two Potatoes, Three Potatoes, Four. (SSS2)	Change the song lyrics to different vegetables or counting systems (e.g. 2, 4, 6, 8). Teach the new version to other students.
4	Do You Like Broccoli Ice Cream? (SSS3)	Create strange or unique foods. Interview other students.
5	Put On Your Shoes (SSS3)	Play charades. Design role-plays.
6	How Much? (Genki English 1)	Design role-plays.
7	What's This? (Genki English 2) Old MacDonald. (Apricot)	Hide objects in a box, quizzing other students about the contents. Focus on vowel sounds.
8	Days of the Week (Apricot)	Link feelings and gestures to weekdays.
9	Breakfast! (Genki English 7)	Use the song as a template for introducing lunch menus. Relate the song to the dialogue featured in Eigo Noto.

Table 2. Possible songs and activities to accompany the MEXT model syllabus.

Further considerations

The fact that music is a recorded medium means that it can be replayed outside of the classroom at any time. Thus, students could be given a CD

copy to listen to at home, be it for pleasure or as homework. This would increase their familiarity with the melodies of new songs, or help them re-view songs that they already know. Furthermore, Japanese primary schools broadcast a student-governed radio show at lunchtime featuring quizzes, music requests, and announcements. I propose that this period could be utilised to introduce or review English songs.

Considerations have also been made to ensure that the songs mentioned in Table 2 are readily available to Japanese teachers. All featured CDs are produced in Japan and aimed specifically at young EFL learners. This consideration is especially beneficial to non-native Japanese teachers, as all publishing companies have excellently maintained websites written in both English and Japanese featuring a multitude of games and activities that can be used in conjunction with their songs. In addition, both the *Genki English* series (Graham, R., n.d.), and *Knock Knock English* have dedicated *YouTube* channels where teachers can view lesson demonstrations on demand.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how songs and appropriate follow-up activities can be used effectively as a pedagogical tool in Japanese primary schools to support the development of listening and speaking skills. Songs are considered particularly beneficial in young learner contexts as they promote a positive learning environment as well as a base for a range of individual, group, and class-based activities. The songs and activities that are selected here are in accordance with the MEXT-designed English syllabus and the learning context of Japanese primary schools. The paper shows that there are not only songs to support every lesson in the syllabus, but also that communicative activities can be incorporated to increase students' language acquisition. Effort has also been taken to ensure that selected songs are available in Japan, from companies that feature bilingual websites to support non-native teachers.



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James York was a full-time primary school English teacher for a total of four years (April 2006 to March 2010). During that time, he worked on numerous classroom-based research projects, including the use of music and literature in young learner EFL contexts before eventually specialising in how a task-based language learning (TBL) methodology can be adapted for use in Japanese primary school contexts. Although he is currently employed at Tokyo Denki University as a full-time English lecturer, he is still committed to performing classroom-based research, and in particular student motivation and the adaptation of TBL in the Japanese EFL context.



OVERHEARD

Sometimes the most important "learning moments" come during the chats between presentations, such as this randomly overheard comment: "Interviews show that often there is one key person or turning point in a student's trajectory, where one particular comment or recommendation by a teacher or other respected person will change that student's life path."

Ever since hearing this comment, I have been reflecting on the teachers and turning points that have led me to 20 years of teaching English in Osaka, as well as how some seemingly random comment by a teacher like us ("Your English is good." or "You should consider studying abroad.") could change a student's life and send them on adventures across the world! (So let's try to do more of that.)

