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National and International Research Articles

Music in English Language Teaching: Theory into Practice

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Introduction

Music has been used in English language teaching for many years with varying degrees of effectiveness. While many teachers see it as an important tool for learning a language and motivating students, there are others who see it as simply a time filler with little value. This last point falls into the category of TENOR (teaching English for no obvious reason, Abbott, 1981). Maybe this is because there has been a disconnection between theory and practice since teachers with little or no pedagogical focus have misused or misunderstood the use of music in their classrooms.

The use of music in English language teaching has attracted a number of studies that claim its benefits to student learning. Engh (2013) has provided a useful overview of the literature of music in English language teaching. He notes that as early as the 1960s and 1970s there were studies (Bartle, 1962; Richards, 1969; Jolly, 1975) that promoted the twin benefits of music use; from language acquisition to motivating student learning. Moving from these general calls to the theoretical background, he overviewed five key areas of research: sociological considerations, cognitive science, first language acquisition, second language acquisition, and practical pedagogical resources. The research outlined is extensive and the conclusions drawn by Engh are that not only do studies in these five areas support the combining of music and language in learning, but also “from an educational standpoint, music and language not only can, but should be studied together” (Engh, 2013, p. 121).

At this point, it is clear that there is solid support from research that outlines the pedagogical and motivational benefits of music in English language teaching. However, in his summation

Engh questions why and when there is such resounding support for music to be used in language teaching, yet there has been such a dearth of teaching materials. Without further research, reasons for this gap are at best speculative. For the teachers at the coalface in need of resources, they tend to either adapt and create music resources or simply not use music at all. This last situation is unfortunate as it deprives the students of a useful means to learn English and the teachers miss out on developing their own skills.

This article argues that music is a tool that many teachers, whether in General English or English for Academic Purposes programmes, should add to their skill set. However, without proper instruction it will be hard for many teachers to move beyond simple uses of music. The article is divided into three sections: choice of music, music activities, and music resources to use. In each of these sections there is a discussion of each question and some practical guidelines for implementing the answers in the classroom.

Choice of music

What type of music to choose and the appropriate artist or band are not always an easy choice. Musical tastes do change and the age group and ethnic mix of the students will influence the selections. Recently the multinational company Pearson (2015) published a survey from 6,000 English language learners from twelve countries. The results showed the Beatles as being voted as the best band to help you learn English (48%). This does seem an odd choice to those outside of the English language sector as the Beatles broke up in 1970 and therefore hardly seem current. Yet, their music has been a staple of English language classrooms for many years (Rundell, 2013). To support their enduring influence there is an interesting infographic ‘The Language of

the Beatles Abbey Road' that claims over 91% of the lyrics on this album are in the West's (1953) General Service List. This seems to add some pedagogical justification for teachers to use the Beatles.

In another survey, this time focusing on more than 500 English language teachers, International English language provider, Kaplan (2013) asked them what tools they used to enhance their classroom teaching. The results showed 86% used music and the Beatles were their favourite band. Now whether there is a clear correlation between the student survey and the teacher survey that is something that needs further investigation. But it does indicate that if the teachers are exposing English language learners to a heavy diet of the Beatles, then they are more than likely to be a student's top pick.

While these results suggest English language teachers are using the Beatles as their musical mainstay, it hardly creates variety. Part of the problem that is implicit in the results of the Kaplan survey is that these seem to be teacher-centred classrooms. It is often the teacher who makes all the decisions and the students have no input. There must be a stretch in logic to think that students from around the world would, if left to their own musical tastes, think the Beatles are the only band worth listening to develop their English. In order to move away from this teacher-centred approach, the idea of the process or negotiated syllabus is worth exploring. This seems it is a fairly controversial concept. The idea of students having input into what they are taught may seem unworkable, but Clarke (1991) believed it was possible to give students a degree of choice in their syllabus. In some ways this can work well with music. If the choice of music is solely dependent on the teacher, then it can be left to chance whether the students response positively to the activities. Not all classes may need to negotiate songs every time. This could be something that occurs at different times once the students understand the activities and what they can learn. Some possible ideas around music choice can include:

- » Eliciting from students a range of music they like (to avoid inappropriate or unusable lyric items, a teacher could negotiate the guidelines for workable music).
- » Checking the lyrics for grammatical or

lexical items that fit your teaching focus.

- » Listening to the song to check for clarity and speed (it needs to be level appropriate).
- » Finding out if there is a music video that can be used in tandem with lyrics that illustrates concepts or ideas that fit a particular theme (sites like YouTube are a popular source of music videos).

Music activities

The use of music and its successful delivery in the classroom is dependent on a number of variables. Obviously, the skillset of the teacher and their use of a range of activities are crucial. If a teacher simply uses gap fill exercises every time they use music this is not making full use of the enhanced benefits that the literature claims about music and language learning. One area of focus is using music to learn grammar structures. Cranmer and Laroy (1992) in their Musical openings: Using music in the language classroom had a chapter that outlines different ways to use songs to teach grammar. They provide some practical examples of how to fully exploit the use of songs to teach grammar. Beyond grammar there are a range of other activities that can be used to enhance the use of music in the classroom. Some activities are outlined below:

- » Gap fill activities (remove discrete vocabulary items such as adjectives, nouns and verbs).
- » Focus on idioms or phrases (these can be common ones or even expressions from varieties of English like New Zealand or Irish English).
- » Word order (change the word order of the lyrics so that students rewrite them).
- » Rearranging lyrics (either cut up and reorder or renumber the lyrics).
- » Lyrics as text (reading for meaning with focus questions on themes).
- » Minimal pairs (students have A and B sheets with almost the same lyrics but some words that are different e.g. band, land).
- » Writing responses to songs (this can range from expressing opinions about protest songs to advising the protagonist in a song about a relationship break up).

All of these activities can be done in a communicative way to enhance the experience for the students. For instance, the activities can

be done in pairs or small groups of three to four students. To add a competitive element it can be timed so the pairs or groups have to work quickly. Teachers who feel they have fully used their own methods of using music often need fresh inspiration. This can be garnered from using and adapting a range of resources either commercially produced or online.

Music resources to use

There are many general English course books that have music and associated tasks. The problem is deciding which ones will work and which ones are best left alone. Many teachers take their lead from the dominant publishers within the industry. In most cases the teaching material is of sufficient quality, but in regards to using music, sometimes the songs are cringe worthy. For instance, Oxford University Press ELT (2016) has some online resources that use rap music to teach English, but the results are unusual songs like 'Rapping Grandma Rap' and the 'Anti-Prejudice Rap'. The problem here is that many of the big publishers use music that is either produced in-house or use popular songs that have been around for decades. Therefore the choices tend to be safe and fairly bland in musical taste. This produces some mixed results for classroom use. However, in their defence, to use actual rap may prove problematic, as it often has language and themes that would be deemed offensive in many cultures. It is a balancing act to stay both relevant and not to offend the consumers who buy your books. For many teachers a way forward is to supplement the course books by using online teacher-produced resources. A simple search on the Internet will produce a range of teacher created resources. Again these do vary in quality, but the best way is simply to check them for any obvious spelling or grammatical errors and then try out the tasks on your students. Once a new task is completed seek feedback from students and other teachers who use the tasks.

There are also some specialist print resources which have been quite innovative. Hancock's (1998) *Singing Grammar: Teaching through songs* is a good source to help many teachers get started. It provides a variety of tasks and has three levels in the text: Elementary, Pre-intermediate, and Intermediate. The principles are sound but

it is a matter of taste as to whether the songs will maintain student interest. Songs that reflect varieties of English other than the dominant American and British English are unfortunately not that common. There are some notable exceptions like the music of Carmel Davies and Sharon Duff. They produced a three part series with songs and tasks called *Sing with me!* (2013; 2016). The books are in the Australian context with original songs that range from everyday situations to dealing with issues of racism. Their music incorporates modern slang, which is a feature of Australian English.

To avoid using the same kind of music, teachers can experiment with the latest music on the music charts. Now this will vary from country to country and therefore can provide some surprising choices. There is a counterargument that you may need to wait until the songs are established as popular before using them as their currency may diminish in a few years (Purcell, 1992). This argument is only relevant for course book writers who expect their material to be used multiple times. The classroom teacher can actually use this to their advantage as they can pick something that was popular and use it as for a springboard for discussion around the temporary nature of hits songs. An additional resource can be the students themselves who not only can choose the songs, but also create tasks for other students. This type of creativity is an important aspect of learner autonomy as they should be included rather than excluded from the process. The only limiting factors are the mind-sets of teachers who may not like giving up control and students who have become too used to teacher-centred classrooms.

Conclusion

The research does show that the use of music in English language teaching has clear benefits in language acquisition and student motivation. The problem arises not from whether it is a good idea to use music, but rather how will a teacher use music. There are no shortage of tasks as these are available in the various print and online resources. The use of music in English language classrooms is a developing area, but I would highly advise also needs focus. Grounding the tasks in applied linguistic theory will help to remove any stigma that it is simply

a time filler. This negative view has often been formed through bad teaching practice or simply a lack of inspired tasks. The development of new resources that are meaningful and purposeful is important if music is to be considered as an ongoing means of teaching English language. The inclusion of students in the process is also vital as this increases both language and

motivation. Variety in teaching is something that is motivating to students and teachers and so the challenge is to fully utilise the teaching tool of music to enhance the English language classroom.

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