

Professional Practice Issues.

Songs + Pedagogy = Enhanced Language Acquisition

Suzanne Medina,¹
California State University,
Dominguez Hills

There are various ways in which songs can be used to enhance second language acquisition, yet some are more effective than others. According to the findings from an investigation on the effects of music upon English vocabulary acquisition, the combination of music and a pedagogically-sound technique produce greater second language acquisition than is possible when using music alone (Medina, 1993). Unfortunately, few teachers combine music and pedagogy in this way when using songs in the E.S.L. classroom. As a result, second language learners may not be fully benefiting from the potentially powerful effects which music can have upon language acquisition. The purpose of this article is to illustrate several ESL-Music activities which succeed at merging songs and pedagogically-sound techniques, thereby supporting the language acquisition process to the fullest extent. These activities come from an inventory of one-hundred similar activities. Beneath the title of the activity is a brief description of the activity followed by its pedagogical purpose and step-by-step instructions for the E.S.L. teacher. Activities have been classified into one of three categories depending upon the point at which they support the language acquisition process: before the song is learned, while the song is presented for the first time, or after it is learned. Depending upon the amount of practice required, teachers may elect to engage students in one or more of each of the three types of activities.

¹ This author can be reached at: Karlene.Ngu@aol.com

ESL-MUSIC ACTIVITIES

Section 1- Activities To Do Before the Song is Learned

DANCE TO THE MUSIC

Description: Students dance to a song they will learn later on. Purpose: If students are presented with a song in which both melody and the song lyrics are new, students may suffer from cognitive overload. Therefore, the intent of this activity is to familiarize students with the new melody prior to hearing the lyrics for the first time. A second purpose is to allow "incidental learning" to occur. Often acquisition takes place in the absence of explicit instruction.

Steps:

- a. Play music in the background while student teams discuss ways in which the song can be choreographed. Students should be encouraged to practice their routines.
- b. Have groups perform for the larger group. The class will vote for the best choreography.

ANTICIPATION

Description: Students learn the meaning of song vocabulary from one another in order to create a skit in which all vocabulary are used.

Purpose: To learn the meaning of vocabulary words which students will hear in the song. By doing this, students will be able to comprehend the significance of the song's lyrics when they actually sing the song later on. Language acquisition cannot occur unless the second language is made comprehensible to the learner (Krashen, 1985).

Steps:

- a. Make a short list of new vocabulary words which are found in the song's lyrics.
- b. Distribute a copy of this list to the students.
- c. Have groups of three or four students create a skit which incorporates the target vocabulary words. Students are encouraged to learn the meaning of these vocabulary by any and all means (e.g., each other, dictionaries).

- d. Ask student groups to perform their skits for the class. Use as many props and costumes as possible.

Section 2- Activities Performed While the Song is Being Presented for the First Time

MUSICAL DRAMA

Description: While students hear the song for the first time, they observe their teacher (and/or aides) dramatize the song's lyrics.

Purpose: To make the meaning of the song's lyrics clear to the learner. This activity will make the meaning of key vocabulary comprehensible to learners, thereby supporting second language acquisition.

Steps:

- a. Gather props and costume items, realia, etc. for actors. If these are not available, have actors improvise by creating hand-drawn pictures on the blackboard or using classroom objects. For example, a lectern can function as a cash register.
- b. Have actors practice acting out the song lyrics as the music is played. They do not need to sing or "lip sync" the song lyrics, only act them out.
- c. Play the song for the class while the actors perform it.

Section 3- Activities Performed After the Song Has Been Presented

MUSICAL MINI-DIALOGUE MIXERS

Description: Students practice mini-dialogues containing specific "patterns" and/or "routines"* which the teacher has extracted from the song's lyrics.

Purpose: It is not sufficient to simply sing the routines and patterns which are found in the song's lyrics. Learners must be able to "transfer" this knowledge to new and different contexts. This exercise allows learners the opportunity to generate original utterances using song patterns and routines in different contexts.

Steps:

a. Identify patterns and/or routines which are found in the song lyrics. For each pattern/routine, create a two-line mini-dialogue. For example, if the target pattern is "I would like for you to meet ____." you might write the following mini-dialogue:

Abe Lincoln: I would like for you to meet Martha.
Micky Mouse: Nice to meet you, Martha.

Feel free to be creative with your mini-dialogues.

b. Present one mini-dialogue at a time to the class. As you write each line on the board, go over its meaning. Have students repeat the mini-dialogue lines a few times.

c. Model what they will do next. Perform one mini-dialogue with one other student. Use face and hand movements to dramatize as you speak. First you will play the role of person X. Then after a few rehearsals of the dialogue, you will switch roles with the other person and assume the role of person Y. Next, you and your partner will find new partners and repeat the process.

d. Have students similarly practice the same mini-dialogues. Have student pairs stand about the room, facing each other as they would at a social gathering.

e. Have student pairs practice each two-line mini-dialogue (preferably with actions) as you did previously. Circulate about the room making certain that students change partners several times.

Once each mini-dialogue has been well-rehearsed, encourage students to vary their mini-dialogue lines slightly. This will promote "transfer" which is the primary purpose of this activity.

f. After there has been adequate practice of the first mini-dialogue, stop the students and introduce the next mini-dialogue in the same manner that you did previously. Repeat steps b through e for each mini-dialogue.

* Note: Patterns are open-ended sentence or question constructions (e.g., I love to ____.; Where do you ____?) Routines are closed questions or sentences which are frequently used by native speakers (e.g., How are you today ?; Excuse me.)

LIP SYNCING TALENT SHOW

Description: Students will "lip sync" the song before a group of student judges.

Purpose: To provide additional opportunities for students to practice saying target vocabulary, routines and patterns which are embedded in the song lyrics. Also, by listening to the song and watching various groups communicate meaning, student observers are given additional opportunities to make the connection between meaning and symbol. This ultimately leads to language acquisition.

Steps:

- a. Divide students into groups of fours.
- b. Have teams practice lip syncing to the song. Encourage them to synchronize their hand movements much like the singing groups of the 50s used to do. Gestures should communicate meaning whenever possible.
- c. Identify three students who will serve as judges of the lip sync talent show.
- d. Play the vocal version of the song so that each team can perform for the class.
- e. Ask the judges to announce the winner. Recognize the winner of the talent show in some way (e.g., candy, applause).

Teachers of ESL would be wise to make use of this means of supporting the language acquisition process, not simply because it is enjoyable for students and teachers alike, but because it is powerful. However, in order to maximize the effects which music can have upon language acquisition, time and attention needs to be spent creating pedagogically-sound activities to support the process.

References

Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. New York: Longman Group Limited.

Medina, S. (1993). The effect of music on second language vocabulary acquisition. *FEES News* (National Network for Early Language Learning, 6 (3), 1-8.