

SONGS: FOOD OF LOVE OR MEAL FOR LANGUAGE?

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ABSTRACT

Songs cover a wide range and are prevalent in the kindergarten and primary years. However, their use decreases in secondary schools, due to constraints of time and the preoccupation to complete the syllabus. Sourcing for the right materials is another deterrent. Songs are a bountiful resource of learning in classrooms, since they address various elements. The primary use is to reinforce the language skill of listening, whereby songs can be utilized in listening tests. Besides that, language items, such as grammar, phonology and vocabulary improve due to the repetitive, rhyming patterns inherent in songs. Songs increase learners' motivation and impart universal values, transcending the barriers of race, religion, creed or colour. With contextualization, a lot of fun can be injected into learning. Learners with Musical Intelligence also accrue a lot of benefits. Listening to the radio is determined as the most frequently employed out-of-class learning strategy. The exposure to songs in class encourages students to extend learning beyond the classroom in a fun way. Through the paradox of work and play, student-teacher rapport and the overall class dynamics improve tremendously, provided the lesson is well prepared and focused.

Introduction

Songs have long been touted in language teaching and learning. Kelly (1969) contends that Saint Jerome and Abelard had mentioned songs in relation to language learning in the Middle Ages (cited in Laroy, 1993). Songs include a wide spectrum: nursery rhymes, children's songs, lullabies, jazz chants, folk songs, pop songs, topical songs, raps, religious hymns as well as jingles. Admittedly, the use of songs is more prevalent in pre-school and primary education, where teachers engage young learners in these fun activities to grab attention. However, the use of songs as an educational resource dwindles in Malaysian secondary schools when students outgrow nursery rhymes and children's songs. Songs are a neglected resource (Laroy, 1993) and have been overlooked and undermined in language learning. A random check with several school teachers and students (urban and rural) informs me that songs are rarely used; once or twice a year (if they are lucky enough). The majority of Malaysian students leave the school system with a poor grasp of English, despite [at least] eleven years of exposure to the language!

Teaching methodologies have been diagnosed as one of the chief variables of demotivation and lack of interest. This lamentable situation thus calls for a review of instructional strategies that affect learning outcomes.

The Deterrents

Many factors can explain the predisposition against songs. Many teachers tend to perceive songs as frivolous entertainment and often brush them aside in favour of less trivial and more exam-oriented approaches. The preoccupation to finish the syllabus and to prepare students for oncoming examinations have resulted in loss of imagination, creativity and innovation. If at all, songs are only fillers used for the teacher's convenience and mood or as demagogic concession (Laroy, 1993). Time constraints too sometimes hinder efforts in planning an effective lesson using songs. This can result in an ad-hoc lesson and although it manages to break the monotony or restlessness on a humid day, fails to achieve its pedagogical goals. Textbooks offer no help, for a random survey proves that songs have not made inroads. Songs can be used as authentic texts similar to poems, short stories, or novels or can function as supplements to textbooks (Dale, 1992) - as preludes or otherwise. Why then, the reluctance?

Availability of Materials

Some teachers, though aware of the exploitability and potential of songs are often discouraged in their search. Looking for a suitable song to complement the teaching of a particular unit demands time and effort. Laments of "Oh, I have no time" are frequent mutterings, further compounded if the teacher possesses scant knowledge of the music industry. With some "refurbishment" in attitude, I believe wonders can be created with this boundless 'trunk of treasure'.

Firstly, a teacher does not need to be a good singer to introduce songs. An innovative strategy may be to write out or say the words, and hum the tune. Recorded songs, with lyrics are limitless. Alternatively, a teacher may seek out songs specially prepared for English Language lessons, which may be obtained commercially. Equipment such as a portable radio is reasonably priced too. Otherwise, the teacher is a resource too. He/She can use his/her voice or sing with the accompaniment of a musical instrument, such as a guitar (Hardisty, 1993). The benefits to be accrued are boundless, as I will discuss below.

Development of Listening Skills

This is often the primary use as aural comprehension can be tested in many ways, namely to fill gaps, answer 'Wh' questions, complete crossword puzzles and rearrange scrambled lyrics. When using songs as listening texts, careful sifting is imperative (especially for pop songs and raps) as the words in some songs are indecipherable (Horner, 1993) or the music may simply be too pervasive. Laroy (1993) contends that songs are unsuitable for listening tests. This, I contend is not true as careful selection and well-planned steps can yield positive outcomes. Using a song in the listening test indeed alleviates stress and anxiety, drifting the learner to a more enjoyable plane.

Language Enrichment

Songs provide regular and rhythmical repetitions of sound and stress, which enhance automaticity of acquisition. They provide a lot of opportunities for developing linguistic competence of grammatical accuracy, besides polishing oratory and literacy skills. The aim of the KBSM (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah) English syllabus for secondary schools is to produce students who are not only linguistically competent, but also, more importantly, communicatively competent. Songs in general, use simple authentic conversational language, with a lot of repetition, as if they were 'tailor-made' to practise and internalize a particular structure. This is why some fragments of songs perpetually stick in our minds. These phrases or nuggets of language expedite acquisition. For some students, the singing of songs resembles what Piaget (1923) describes as egocentric language, in which children talk with little concern for an addressee and simply enjoy hearing themselves repeat. The need for egocentric language never leaves them, hence a fulfillment derived from songs. Krashen (1982) suggests that this involuntary repetition may be a manifestation of Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device (LAD) as human brains have a natural propensity to repeat what is heard in the environment to make sense of it.

In teaching grammar items and phonology, this repetitive structure is extremely useful. In '*She'll Be Coming Round The Mountain*', a popular folk song, the 'will+be+verb+ing' form repeats throughout, hence a good sample of the Future Continuous Tense and inflections. With some innovation and contextualization the teacher can create fun and invoke their imagination. Elicitations like 'She'll be eating *kacang puteh* when she comes', 'She'll be driving a *Proton Waja* when she comes!' can be encouraged. Another example is '*London Bridge*' to teach the Present Continuous Tense by substituting the life-threatening event of a bridge falling with positive elements, like 'KL Tower is soaring high, my fair *makcik* ...'. The spirit of nationalism is ingrained too, since the KBSM syllabus advocates a holistic approach to language teaching and stresses the

importance of contextualization of language structures and moral and spiritual aspects in education. With adequate encouragement by the teacher, students can open up.

Other songs suitable to teach tenses are Donovan's '*Universal Soldier*', The Beatles' '*Penny Lane*', Sonia's '*End of the World*' (Simple Present Tense) and '*A Day in the Life*' by The Beatles (Past Tense). Internalizing of word stress, pronunciation and spelling are other learning outcomes, via rhythm, tones and rhymes. Jazz Chants, such as '*Banker's Wife's Blues*', '*You Did It Again*' and '*Sh! Sh! Baby's Sleeping*' are ideal as they are simple in content, yet contain powerful catchy rhyming patterns. A previously learnt structure can be reinforced with the new structure. Some form of vocabulary acquisition and idiomatic expressions can occur too although the range is generally limited. Weak learners can begin with nursery rhymes such as '*Old McDonald Had A Farm*' and '*Cock-A-Doodle-Do*', with rudimentary vocabulary and lay the groundwork for further enrichment.

Motivational Value

Songs are fun, relaxing and highly motivating. They are perhaps the leading reason why teenagers throughout the world become interested in English (Horner, 1993). They form an integral part of every teenager who may make heavy investments in possessing the latest albums or in Karaoke sessions for the sake of their "undying love and passion." Students often seek out the lyrics and to learn these in class, is motivating. Dawson (1985) suggests that teachers motivate and amplify curiosity by not only using pop songs, which most students have heard of, but also those that students do not know.

Activities carried out with songs are motivating as they use "the students'" music, "their" knowledge, and "their" language. Songs also encourage harmony within oneself and within a group. The overall class dynamics can improve via songs. When a student feels relaxed, his/her affective domain is open to learning. Language learning occurs best when the affective filter is low and the learner is free from anxiety, nervousness and stress (Krashen, 1982). Songs are just about the right 'drill', which penetrate the hearts and souls of the learners, by creating a conducive and relaxed atmosphere.

Besides that, songs also develop the sense of beauty and aesthetic values in learners as they have a personal quality that makes the listener feel as if he/she is in personal interaction with the singer, thus, creating a world of feelings and emotions, for them, and by them.

Imparting Values and Awareness

Songs are also effective in imparting moral and spiritual values to learners. Many hit songs advocate peace, harmony and glorious conduct (e.g. 'Hero' by Mariah Carey, 'The Greatest Love of All' by Whitney Houston, 'Black or White' by Michael Jackson, 'Sleeping Child' by Michael Learns To Rock and environmental consciousness like 'The Elephant Song' by Kamahl, 'Saltwater' by Jullian Lennon and 'Heal the World' by Michael Jackson). These songs are motivating not only for their inherent values, but because these values are preached by famous singers who may be the students' idols and role models. In fact, there are samples of songs that fit every learning unit in our KBSM syllabus. Examples are jingles from the radio (Messages from the Mass Media), 'Hokey Pokey' (Instructions), 'Nobody's Child' by Karen Young (Public Spiritedness), 'Coward of the Country' by Kenny Rogers (Stories on Moral Values) and 'Don't Worry Be Happy' by Bobby McFerrin (Health Care).

Songs are also useful in integrating historical and cultural awareness. 'Old Black Joe', a children's song allows the retrieval of American History and slavery in the 18th century, a topic, some of our learners may not know of! 'Rasa Sayang Singapore' by Dick Lee reinforces oriental culture and values. 'Clementine' has historical links to the Californian Gold Rush in the 16th century, the love between Levi Strauss and Clementine, her death and the succeeding events leading to the advent of Levi's Jeans. We can use local medleys like 'Oh Malaysia', 'Let's Show The World' by Roy, 'Standing In The Eyes Of The World' by Ella and 'The World Is Looking at Malaysia' to reinforce the values of patriotism evoked by John Denver's 'Country Roads.'

Songs should also find their way during festive seasons. 'Hot Cross Buns', 'Silent Night', '12 Days of Christmas' and other festive numbers can be played during language lessons (as a learning unit or in the background) around cultural or religious festivities. These songs **do not** have religious undercurrents. With a dose of tolerance and open-mindedness, they would foster unity, cement racial harmony and goodwill as they are congruent with the aspirations of multi-cultural education. Songs can make the first milestone to realize the objectives of creating holistic and balanced beings.

Launching Pad for Other Activities

Songs need not be an isolated event, but a basis which leads into a range of other activities, including role-plays, discussions, story-telling, letter writing, letters to the editor, essays, summary writing, journal writing and group projects. Discussions of themes increase awareness of current affairs and other values of life, where reactions to the verbal sensibility of others are witnessed. Songs speak a universal language, com-

mon to all cultures: love, faithfulness, heartbreak and marriage, life and death, nature and the environment, women's liberation, patriotism and emigration. For example, 'Pearls' by Sade, 'Black or White' by Michael Jackson and 'We Are The World' are gateways to follow-up activities on famine, war, poverty, racial prejudice and other global problems. Mariah Carey's 'Hero' can be followed-up by 'The Greatest, My Own Story', a text by Muhammad Ali with Richard Durham. With 'I Swear', a song of commitment and love by All-4-One, pre and post marital lives can be compared. 'Don't Cry Joni' by Conway Twitty too provides a platform for enactment of 'love triangles' and broken hearts.

Awakening of Musical Intelligence

Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligence (1983) states that intelligence is not a single construct but constitutes seven distinct intelligences, which an individual can develop over a lifetime. These intelligences are Verbal/Linguistic Intelligence, Musical Intelligence, Logical/Mathematical Intelligence, Spatial/Visual Intelligence, Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence, Interpersonal Intelligence and Intrapersonal Intelligence. Some discerning skills of Musical Intelligence are the ability to vary speed, tempo and rhythm in simple melodies, sensitivity to sounds and use of "schemas" to hear music. The theory has given rise to a paradigm shift to address the need for diversity and variety in instruction. In light of human differences, it calls for a review of one's best teaching techniques and strategies. Using songs intermittently in the language class acknowledges Musical Intelligence, as Christison (1996:11) supports: "*Using different intelligences creates a deeper, richer and more varied approach to learning*".

Students who possess Musical Intelligence can capitalize on it to access pertinent information from a lesson, as they may have less inclination towards other learning styles and teaching strategies. Cranmer (1993:47) cites:

The 'quietest' students, who tend also to be the most sensitive, often have particularly strong views on what they have heard and become much more vocal than usual in music-based lessons.

Enhancement of Out-of-Class Language Learning Strategies

Pickard's (1996) study on the out-of-class learning activities revealed that the passive activities of listening and reading are prevalent, especially listening to the radio. Songs are catalysts for the exploration of out-of-class learning strategies, which would lead to intrinsic motivation of listening to local radio stations for music input and improvement of proficiency. Little literature data is available on the development of language from

extensive listening to the radio (Pickard, 1996). However, the input of songs and music that learners receive correspond with Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis of the Monitor Model. The medium of radio may aid language acquisition and learning is meaningful as it is not confined to the classroom and the teacher. Our Education Philosophy envisages learning as a lifelong process and the role of education is to provide points of takeoff to fulfill Vision 2020 and beyond. Almost all households in Malaysia have a radio of some description, hence access to this portable learning medium is available.

Work and Play

Since singing injects a lot of laughter and enjoyment into a lesson, some teachers have the notion that no serious learning takes place when the lesson has activities that look more like 'play'. This distorted notion of the incompatibility of work and play should be dispelled. A teacher can instil values by incorporating elements of fun and allowing levity. As long as the objectives are clearly defined and focussed, meaningful and serious learning can occur through the paradox of 'work' and 'play'. Songs become vectors, which help teachers and learners discover the best in themselves.

Student-Teacher Rapport

Fun and enjoyment derived from songs and singing, invariably increase student-teacher rapport. The looming barrier of culture, race, religion and age can be reduced if the teacher strives to penetrate the minds and the interests of the students. Songs speak a language, which is universal and transcends the barriers of race, religion, colour or creed. The common interest in songs and compatible wavelength help the teacher to make inroads into the students' social groups and gain acceptance among them.

Conclusion

From the depth and breadth of the discussion above, it is evident that the varieties of tasks and activities utilizing songs are as infinite and varied as the human imagination. Songs are flexible and can suit a learner's individual needs. As Rivers (1987:96) aptly puts it:

As language teachers, we are the most fortunate of teachers – all subjects are ours, whatever the students want to communicate, whatever they want to read about, it is our subject matter.

Why then, is this versatile resource often sidelined in our English lessons? The use of songs in the teaching of English can complement and consolidate the teaching and learning process, through careful selection and consideration of its contents, theme,

language structures and relevance to a particular language unit. However, songs should not be used on an ad-hoc basis or as mere fun interludes. By exposing learners to English songs, we are actually unbolting the doors of their minds and widening their horizons by allowing the real world to 'enter' the classroom. Songs are part of what makes a generation (Dale, 1992). The current generation in our schools is a global generation, not a parochial one. The world is evolving a common culture and by utilizing songs, we ensure that our students are part of the emerging world culture.

Some teachers may be reluctant to use songs for fear of parents' reactions. English songs should not be perceived as a bad influence. If integrated within a framework of clearly defined aims, and if the right songs are selected and introduced in the right way, at the right time, with the right learners, they can underpin the learners' success. Teachers should consider more contextualization to give the touch of local flavour and acceptance in our culture. Another way is to use English numbers of local singers, like Sheila Majid, Ella and Ning Baizura, whom students can relate to.

Murphey (1985) refers to songs as 'adolescent motherese'. 'Motherese' is the highly affective and musical language that adults use with infants. As children grow up, they get less and less of this and at adolescence, this affective 'motherese' is greatly reduced. Songs are seen to fill the vacuum and to address the yearning for this affective attention. One can never really grow out of nursery rhymes or children's songs, for there is a child in everyone. Not only does "the language we have been dissecting into a series of structural points become whole again," (Celce-Murcia, 1988) but we will also be fuelling the flames of desire in our students – the desire to learn.

I, therefore, call on teachers to consider the use of songs more often in their language classrooms to make the teaching and learning process of English a meaningful one. We need to reflect and act on what Shakespeare says in his famous play, *Twelfth Night*, "*If music be the food of love, play on.*" If Shakespeare lived in the 21st century, he would have fully agreed that music is not only the food of love *but* also a sumptuous meal for language learning.

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