

The value of songs and chants for young learners

Elizabeth Forster

British Council Primary School in Madrid

Abstract

Chants and songs have long been recognised as fun and child-friendly tools in both First and Second Language Acquisition. This article proposes that this pedagogic recourse has a strong linguistic justification based on recent neurological studies on how the brain processes and produces speech. However, the main focus of the article is looking at the why and how of using songs and chants in the young learner classroom.

Key words: Pedagogical tools, Prosody, Pronunciation, Didactics of EFL, Music and rhythm

Resumen

Canciones y trozos de lenguaje rítmico (es decir *chants*) han ganado un lugar merecido en la enseñanza de una lengua, primera o segunda. Este artículo propone que este recurso pedagógico tiene probada justificación lingüística basada en estudios neurológicos que investigan como el cerebro procesa y produce el habla. El énfasis principal de este artículo será examinar como mejor aprovechar este recurso pedagógica con alumnos en los primeros años de primaria.

Palabras clave: herramientas pedagógicas, prosodia, pronunciación, didáctica de EFL, música y ritmo

1. The Value of Songs and Chants for Young Learners

Two basic questions will be asked in this article and an attempt made to respond to them. First of all WHY should songs and chants be an important element in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class and secondly some ideas as to HOW to make the best use of this teaching resource.

Why teach songs and chants

Here are some of the reasons that I believe justify an increased and systematic use of songs and chants.

- Children will noticeably increase their vocabulary bank of lexical items and multi-word structures. These multi-word structures can include a range of sociolinguistic situations appropriate to the age and needs of the pupils such as greetings, leave-takings, requests and any language items necessary for basic classroom functions and routines.
- There will be an improvement in English speech rhythms, intonation and pronunciation.
- Memorisation of longer word strings will be facilitated.
- Music and rhythm work can be dovetailed into grammar and language activities and allow for fun and creative uses of classroom time outside of the specific time allotted for “English”. This gives the

practitioner more scope and time for teaching and allows more and varied opportunities for the pupils to practise new language skills.

The Neurological Aspect

It has long been established that, in most people, the left hemisphere is the part of the brain where most language tasks are processed. However, many recent studies suggest an important role for the right hemisphere (RH) in specific language tasks. Evidence seems to suggest that the RH deals with the prosody of language, that is to say the musicality and rhythm of a language which include elements such as accent, intonation, etc. The RH deals with broader semantic information while the left hemisphere (LH) deals with smaller, more analytical details. In other words the RH does not tend to analyse the relationships between words but rather takes in the “wholeness” of a phrase and puts it into a broader semantic context. The message is what is important to the RH leaving the analysis to the LH. Now, given this evidence we might theorise that the RH is where songs and chants are first processed, when it is the musicality or rhythmic and communicative aspect that is being given importance. Now, why is this important to us as teachers? It is important because it tells us something about how to best make use of songs and chants in the classroom. To explain a bit further I will need to make reference to two different types of learning processes: the explicit and implicit modes of learning. To learn something implicitly means that it is a more unconscious learning process, like the learning of a song or a chant or like the way that young children learn to speak their native language. The explicit learning mode is a much more conscious, analytical process of learning. The explicit mode is used when an individual attends to a particular aspect of a linguistic stimulus, not the whole message. A good example would be in the learning of a structure such as “My name is _____”. Most young children in an EFL classroom learn this structure implicitly at first as a communicative tool, only later perhaps being asked to analyse the structure of the sentence, which would be the explicit mode at work. Going back to the why question posed at the beginning of this article, the answer begins to become clearer. When we teach songs and chants to young children we are using the implicit approach which is probably situated in the RH. Later, to be able to make the children aware of these structures and how and when to use them, we will have to go at it from a more explicit fashion, thus pushing the LH into play. But before going into more detail as to how to go about this, there is another important benefit of the teaching of songs and chants that will give us a broader picture of the why question posed above.

The Linguistic Aspect - Prosody

English is a stressed timed language. This means that in any given stretch of language, some syllables are of longer duration than others. This is opposed to the syllable timed languages where each syllable receives approximately the same amount of emphasis and time. This is an extremely difficult aspect to teach to young learners and cannot be approached from an analytical perspective. With older learners this facet of English can be taught from a phonetic point of view known as the bottom-up approach where you go from sound to prosody. With younger learners this is neither viable nor possible and a top-down approach which goes from prosody to sound is much more recommendable. This is where chants and songs come into the picture. Chants can be defined as stretches of real language put into a rhythmic framework. This same rhythmic framework lends itself well to teaching a stress timed language since a certain number of syllables have to fit into specific time pattern. This is an efficient way of teaching where the stresses lie in a phrase and which syllables or words have less emphasis.

The Linguistic Aspect – Vocabulary and Grammar

Songs and chants are also useful in teaching long stretches of real language. We have all had the experience of trying to remember the words to a song and failing dismally until a musical cue was given to us and then the words just seemed to fall into place along with the musical pattern. This is why musically or

rhythmically based learning allows us to teach longer stretches of language. These songs and chants can be related to classroom functions, daily routines or communicative situations that are relevant to the age of the students. These same songs and chants can also later be used to illustrate or exemplify a structural or grammatical point. The students will already be “using” the grammar point in question, in the context of the song or chant, of course, and will find it easier to then understand the grammatical explication given by the teacher and situate it within their own linguistic experience.

2. How to teach songs and chants

The obvious first step is simply that: teach the chant or song. But the question is how to best go about this. The first step to take into consideration is the age of the students and the second is the relevance of the song or chant. Young children will love anything with music or a beat so why not take advantage of this to teach them vocabulary items and language items that will also be useful to them in basic communication acts or classroom situations. This does not mean to say that all songs or chants taught have to be relevant or classroom related, sometimes the fun of a nonsense song or rhyme is just that, having some fun! Some basic guidelines could be the following:

- Start off orally, leave the written element for later.
- A little each lesson is better than longer, more concentrated spans of time.
- Review what you did the previous lesson and add a bit more.
- Revisiting learned songs and chants offers opportunity for review and confidence building.

A second stage of the teaching of songs and chants could be the following:

- Expand on the chant for further grammar or vocabulary.
- Use chants to teach speech rhythm and stress.
- Invent your own chant to suit specific needs.

The actual process of teaching a chant would look something like this:

- Teacher takes the longer part leaving the repetition to the pupils.
- Eventually have the pupils take on more of the oral load.
- Then establish dialogues using the chants.
- Once the chant is learned, add variations so vocabulary and grammar structures are extended.
- Create opportunities to use the structures learned through the chants so that they become incorporated into the analytical “left brain”.

The majority of textbooks on the market today make wide use of songs to teach English. I have a personal favourite for the chants and songs that I use in my classroom: “*Jazz Chants for Children*” by Carolyn Graham and the example that I am going to use now to illustrate the points listed above comes from that book.

Where’s Jack

Where’s Jack?

He’s not here.

Where did he go?

I don’t know.

Where’s Mary?

She’s not here.

Where did she go?
 I don't know.

Where are Sue and Bobby?
 They're not here.

Where did they go?
 I don't know.

Where's Mr. Brown?
 He's over there.

Where?
 Over there,
 asleep in the chair.

(Taken from "Jazz Chants for Children" by Carolyn Graham, Oxford University Press 1979).

This chant could be done even with very young children and is readily connected to that basic classroom routine of taking the register every morning. The only initial language elements that the children have to learn are very basic "He/she's not here" and "I don't know". This could then be expanded to include the plural form "They're not here". The teacher would initially carry the heavier load with the children simply responding in group but this could soon change to individual children responding accordingly and then a group of children formulating the questions and another group responding thus creating dialogue situations. Whenever appropriate the personal pronouns could be pointed out and emphasized. The chant could be expanded on to include inanimate objects and thereby include a wider range of pronouns and perhaps some prepositions. The structure "I don't know" could be extracted from the chant and used in many other different communicative situations and thus pushing it into the left brain for later and more creative use. So, in the process of a few weeks time and using just a few minutes a day we can efficiently mesh vocabulary and grammar in a space not usually allotted for "English" as such. This will allow our pupils to see English as something both fun and useful and totally integrated into their normal school routines.

But there's still another very important element of chants that should be exploited in the EFL classroom and that is the use of songs and chants to improve intonation, pronunciation and speech rhythm. This article has already sung the praises of chants in the teaching of these aspects of English language but the question we are looking at here is HOW to go about this.

The basic idea for this type of exercise came from the reading of two different articles; the first by H. Nakano, N. Yoshida and K. Natsume, and the second by Robin Walker and the sources are cited in the references.

Once a chant has been taught to the children the rhythmic aspect could be given a special focus. Carolyn Graham has recently written a book called "Creating Chants and Songs" and anyone interested in finding out more about how to go about designing your own chants would find a wealth of useful information in this book. But, if we want to get down to very simple basic concepts we could say that chants are usually organised into 4 rhythmic beats. If this were presented in a more graphic form our chant "Where's Jack" would look something like this:

Where's Jack

Where's Jack? He's not here.
Where did he go? I don't know.

Where's Mary? She's not here.
Where did she go? I don't know.

Where are Sue and Bobby? They're not here.
Where did they go? I don't know.

Where's Mr. Brown He's over there.

Where? Over there, asleep in the chair.

The bigger squares indicate the stronger emphasis and the chant could be accompanied with clapping or with some type of percussion instruments giving a stronger beat to the bigger square-shaped symbols. Each question and answer dialogue component should “fit” within a 4 beat rhythm pattern. This format ensures that all the words have to be enunciated within this rhythmic time slot and the children will begin to get a feel for the stress timed aspect of English. We could then take this idea one step further and combine work on both rhythm and vocabulary and thereby putting both brain hemispheres into play. Such an activity might look something like this:

Where's Jack

Where's Jack? He's not here.
Where did he go? I don't know.

Where's Mary? She's not here.
Where did she go? I don't know.

Where are Sue and Bobby? They're not here.
Where did they go? I don't know.

Where's Mr. Brown He's over there.

Where? Over there, asleep in the chair.

In this way the children would only have the rhythmic pattern to guide them and would have to make use of their memory to fill in the vocabulary gaps. This is a type of oral cloze activity and gets all kind of neural endings firing! The clapping and use of gestures also makes use of all those elements recommended by the Total Physical Response approach to teaching and one that is particularly appropriate for younger children.

The final step proposed at the beginning of this article was to design chants and songs to fit specific needs in the classroom. Every group of children is different and the teacher may have a specific language structure or classroom routine that needs attention. There are two simple ways to go about creating your own song or chant. If the teacher feels more comfortable with a melodic approach, then the answer would be to find a song that the children already know and simply put new words to the song. Familiar melodies with new words are easily learned and retained. For example, a simple classroom routine like tidying up the class before a break could be put into simple language structures and then into a well-known melody. Once learned the teacher could give the “musical cue” and the children would start to sing and work (with a little training) at the same time.

Designing a chant would follow a slightly different format. First a language structure needs to be decided upon and then that structure put into a rhythmic pattern, keeping it simple to start with, using the basic 4 count pattern. Here’s a possible example based on a daily classroom routine; entering the classroom and hanging up coats, putting away bags and snacks in the right place. This could be teacher led with the children chanting along until the task is completed.

Hang up coats, bags away

Put your snacks in the tray

The words in black print get more emphasis than the other elements and there is a clear 4 count rhythm in each phrase. The rhyming element facilitates memorisation and is a useful tool to expand upon later when dealing with word analysis and spelling skills. These simple rhythmic patterns could be expanded on and include extra claps and different basic rhythms for older children.

3. Conclusion

The basic purpose of this article is to examine some pedagogical resources useful for teaching English to Young Learners. Songs and chants are a part of most teachers’ daily didactic routine but this article proposes some explanations as to why this tool is so useful in the primary class and how to use this resource to facilitate the learning experience in areas such as prosody and pronunciation.

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