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IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This article discusses the use of *music in the classroom*, followed by an exploration of the benefits of its principle subcategories: *songs in the classroom* and *singing in the classroom*. Possible objections to singing in the classroom are then addressed. *Chorus English* is firmly situated within the *singing in the classroom* subcategory. *Chorus English* is defined and its linguistic and affective benefits for teenagers and young adults in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in Japan are summarized.

要 旨

本稿は、授業における音楽の利用について言及し、その主要なサブカテゴリ、使用される曲、及び歌うことの恩恵について探していく。授業で歌うことについての反論にも触れる。「コーラス・イングリッシュ」の根幹を成すのは、授業における歌唱であることは言うまでもない。本稿では「コーラス・イングリッシュ」を定義し、外国語としての英語教育を行う上での言語学的利点を要約する。

1. Introduction

“Life seems to go on without effort when I am filled with music,” says Maggie in George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss* (Eliot, 2004, chapter 3). Noticing this, language teachers often use *music in the classroom* to relax and motivate their students. Interestingly, in articles promoting the use of *music in the classroom* it is not uncommon for the term to be used as a stand-in for more precise subcategories, like *songs in the classroom* or *singing in the classroom*.

However, it is clear that there are more potential benefits to singing a song than simply using music to spark interest in unrelated activities. The most obvious advantage of singing is that one gets to practice the prosodic features of English — pronunciation, intonation, pitch, and so on.

With these observations in mind, the authors will begin by examining the theoretical rationale for *music in the classroom*, followed an exploration of the concept’s more precise subcategories: *songs in the classroom* and *singing in the classroom* since each subsequent term is more precise than the one preceding it, and yields additional classroom benefits. Possible objections to *singing in the classroom* will then be addressed. Lastly, *Chorus English* is defined and discussed as it relates to teenagers and young adults in the EFL context in Japan.

2. Theoretical Rationale for Music in the Classroom

For decades, numerous educators have been promoting the use of music in the English as

a second language, and English as a foreign language, classrooms to improve student language ability and motivation (Engh, 2013, p. 113). Potential benefits include: lowering students’ affective filter by reducing their anxiety (Aida, 1994); increasing student awareness of rhythm (Ashtiani & Zafarghandi, 2015, 2015); exposing students to foreign culture (Ashtiani & Zafarghandi, 2015, 2015); and augmenting students’ vocabulary, pronunciation (Ashtiani & Zafarghandi 2015), fluency, listening comprehension, and grammar (Arleo, 2000, p. 5). In addition, music can help students communicate more effectively and foster language acquisition (York, 2011).

However, *Music in the classroom* is an all-encompassing term, covering activities as varied as writing about one’s favorite composer to singing pop songs. Although it is self-evident that benefits derived from using music in the classroom depend entirely on which activities the students partake in, this imprecise term is often used as a substitute for more precise approaches, like *singing in the classroom*. The uses of *music in the classroom* are truly diverse, but we will outline below why and how music in general is most often used in the classroom.

According to linguist, Stephen Krashen, anxiety compromises language acquisition due to what he calls an “affective filter” (1980). To counter this, some teachers use music to relax students in an effort to lower the filter and promote language acquisition (Vishnevskaja, et al., 2019, p.1808). Teachers who wish to alter the mood of a class in order to create a more effective learning environment

may choose one type of music to uplift a dependent class and another to calm a rambunctious one (Arleo, 2000, p.11, 13). Still others may use music to add variety to an otherwise predictable curriculum.

Since music is important to most teenagers and young adults, some teachers use it as a topic to motivate students to write their opinions or take part in a discussion (Arleo, 2000, p.11). However, this can be done without actually listening to any music.

Ashtiani and Zafarghandi point out that “Music and specially songs help learners, either possessing musical aptitude or not, to acquire words and sounds in an enjoyable manner” and that age is not relevant (2015, p. 213). They add that according to “numerous authors,” music in the classroom can be used for “relaxation, concentration, motivation, cultural awareness, vocabulary acquisition, ear training and pronunciation” (2015, 2015, p. 213). Aware of the versatility of music in the classroom, Arleo (2000) states that it can constitute “an entire course over a semester or academic year” (p.11).

Music in the classroom tends to manifest itself within its two main subcategories: *songs in the classroom* and *signing in the classroom*. Since the latter is a subdivision of *songs in the classroom*, which is in turn a subgroup of *music in the classroom*, it can partake in the benefits of both its parent categories while adding benefits of its own.

Engh sums up the advantages of *music in the classroom* well when he writes,

Overall, the results are clear in

suggesting use of music and song in the language-learning classroom is both supported theoretically by practicing teachers and grounded in the empirical literature as a benefit to increase linguistic, sociocultural and communicative competencies (2013, p. 121).

Because of the expansive and imprecise nature of the term *music in the classroom*, the authors now turn their focus to its two principle subcategories, the first being, *songs in the classroom*.

3. Songs in the Classroom

For our purposes we define “song” as popular music performed in English, primarily by Western singers and bands and we will confine *songs in the classroom* to listening only.

Songs can carry various pedagogical benefits. According to Engh (2003), “pop songs are conversation-like, repetitive and occur at roughly half the speed of spoken discourse” (p. 117). Arleo (2000) describes songs as “a hybrid form between music and language” (2000, p. 6). Salcedo (2002) writes that “a song tells a story set to music; therefore, one has examples of authentic speech that is slowed, rhythmic, and repetitious — a powerful tool to impress upon the individual learning experience” (p.127). Additionally, such songs increase the students’ amount of Comprehensible Input, aligning with the “The Input Hypothesis” which is one of Krashen’s hypotheses of second language acquisition (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

In reference to the repetitive nature of songs, Arleo (2000) says that students enjoy

repeated exposure to words and phrases in songs. He adds that a song is also good for listening comprehension, because it “sticks in our heads” which “suggests that it plays a role in our short-and long-term memory” (p.11). The author Jones discusses the role of repetition in language acquisition in his paper (Jones, 2011). It is likely that everyone has experienced this phenomenon. In addition, songs can make students aware of rhythm (Ashtiani & Zafarghandi, 2015. p. 212); expose them to foreign culture (Ashtiani & Zafarghandi, 2015. p. 212); and help them acquire connected speech (Ashtiani 2015 et al. p. 214).

In addition, songs can also promote “pedagogical diversity” and contribute to “effective learning, of: pronunciation, fluency, listening comprehension, memorization of vocabulary and grammatical structures...” (Arleo, 2000, p. 5). Of course, such benefits do not materialize after listening to just any song in the classroom. Teachers need to select “pedagogically useful” and motivating songs (Arleo, 2000, p.12). Well-considered, complementary activities are also essential. Songs can have a lasting impact on students and can transport their minds back to the context in which there were learned; the author Kinsman still recalls the French-language music he was exposed to in while studying French in Quebec, Canada more than 20 years ago. The author Jones similarly recalls Japanese children’s songs from his Japanese introductory lessons, also 20 years ago.

However, a song is more than just its linguistic content; it can “be considered a powerful agent of positive social relations” (Good

& Russo, 2016) and can create a “friendly and co-operative atmosphere so important for language learning” (Engh, 2013, p. 115). Ornerova (2009) states that “...songs create a relaxed and fun atmosphere in the classroom (p. 21) because “The research findings show that learning English through pop songs is very popular among teenagers” (Ornerova 2009, p. 8). By lowering the affective filter, songs can enhance language acquisition (York, 2011).

The unique character of songs in general and pop songs in particular make them ideal sources of authentic English. However, the benefits multiply when taking that next step, singing them together in the classroom.

4. Singing in the Classroom

Singing in the classroom is a more precise term than songs in the classroom. However, it can partake in its benefits, while adding many more of its own. For our purposes *Singing in the classroom* refers to students listening to and subsequently singing pop songs as a group.

According to York, group singing facilitates communication, decreases anxiety, and fosters language acquisition by lowering the affective filter (2011). It also allows for vocalization without the fight or flight response conversations can bring about since everyone is vocalizing the same words simultaneously; the words are scripted; and there is no linguistic back-and-forth where listening, understanding and forming an appropriate response are required.

Engh (2013), referring to Anshel and Kipper

(1988), writes that they “suggest that group participation in singing positively influences both trust and cooperation, which are primary contributors to the progression of group cohesion and a sense of community” (p. 114). We can see this phenomenon when people sing national anthems and school songs. A sense of community and a feeling of belonging can go a long way in producing positive effects which have the potential of carrying over into other classes as well.

Singing is also an effective way for students to increase their spoken fluency. Ashtiani and Zafarghandi state that singing offers a chance to practice connected speech, a linguistic feature often absent in “teacher and audio materials” (2015, p. 214). They add that “EFL learners, through listening to the songs and singing them can improve their listening and speaking skills in terms of foreign language sensitivity and awareness of phonology, which are the essential capacities necessary for a near-native-like communication” (2015, p. 212). Murphy (2010) writes that since singing is a form of communication where “students concentrate on messages and ideas as they would in their native language” (p.242).

Aware of the innumerable benefits of singing, teachers of young learners often sing and move with their students in the classroom. Being generally less self-conscious than teenagers, young learners are more willing to take risks and have fun in the classroom, creating an environment that fosters the acquisition of English.

However, in junior high and beyond, instead

of modifying singing activities to accommodate teenagers and young adults, teachers may instead use music or song as a writing or discussion topic, or use them to motivate students to study vocabulary and grammar. There are various reasons why these teachers may avoid *singing in the classroom*.

5. Possible Objections to Singing in the Classroom

Teachers at junior high schools, high schools, and colleges/universities who would like to take advantage of the potential benefits of singing with their students may avoid doing so for a variety of reasons. Perhaps administrators, parents, other teachers, or possibly even the students themselves might consider singing songs to be of little educational value. Even some of the authors’ own students hold that enjoyable activities and educational ones are mutually exclusive.

Engh (2013) tells us that teachers who are unaware of the data on the benefits of music in the classroom, feel “unable to defend the decision to champion use of music in the classroom to administrators, business English students or those in a predominantly exam focused environment” (p. 113). However, sharing the benefits on the subject with distractors may bring about a change in opinion. If the teacher has made wise song selections – with some student input and with the difficulty level in mind (Medina 1990, p. 13) – she may notice her students singing the songs spontaneously. Reluctant students can be “gradually led” into singing (Arleo, 2000, p.12).

Other concerns revolve around the low

frequency of some words in some songs, their oft-poetic form, altered intonation and word order (York, 2011). In other words, songs may not be seen as comprehensible input (Krashen, 1980) or useful for everyday communication. Thus, both prudence when selecting songs and adaptability when using them in the classroom are required. An example of the later would be limiting the students to the chorus of a song, or the teacher can help the class create new lyrics for the song (York, 2011).

Additional objections may come from the EFL teacher herself, believing that she is not a good singer or lacks musical ability. However, the teacher's role need not be that of lead singer or music teacher. Lead singing is often best left to the voice on the recording. The teacher can unassumingly add her voice to the collective voice of the class. That being said, if the teacher has an antipathy toward music and/or singing, *Chorus English* would be best left to others.

It is clear then that singing songs can positively influence language learning by lowering students' affective filter, altering their mood, improving their prosody, and deepening their cultural awareness. These benefits can be achieved in a variety of ways, one of which is *Chorus English*.

6. What is Chorus English?

Chorus English is a way of doing singing in the classroom. It ensures that teenage and young adult EFL students in Japan continue benefitting from singing in English until they graduate from high school or university.

We define Chorus English as an approach where EFL students sing popular songs in English as a group with the goal of performing them well from a linguistic perspective. Students, motivated by the song itself and by the desire to sing it well, improve in areas such as: pronunciation, intonation, word connection, volume and pitch, but also in comprehension of the song's meaning, which in turn impacts prosody. These can happen as a result of language acquisition and when necessary, language study. Simply stated, *Chorus English* students can improve their English-speaking skills by getting better at singing songs, and they get better at singing songs through practice and a desire to sing them well.

Fortunately, even students who are interested exclusively in Japanese pop songs (J-pop) or Korean pop songs (K-pop) are often familiar with many English-language pop songs. It is by taking that extra step and singing these songs, students can reap the benefits inherent in singing together as a group.

To reiterate, Chorus English is not designed to enhance the quality of one's singing voice, but help students sing songs in English well by creating an environment where one's prosody and comprehension of the song's meaning can develop. The teacher's role is that of a facilitator who selects appropriate songs; creates activities which foster a deeper understanding of the lyrics, and which improve the students' pronunciation, intonation, and general prosody. A sense of community is an important by-product.

Unlike the singing done with young learners, *Chorus English* rather than being play-oriented, more closely resembles a glee club, where people enjoy singing together and find satisfaction in singing a song well. Because *Chorus English* is goal oriented, it resembles speeches and presentations, the objective being to deliver a sound presentation, where learning takes place as one progresses toward the goal.

However, unlike speeches and presentations, singing is more enjoyable and therefore can keep the attention of nearly any student. In addition, *Chorus English* transfers pressure and responsibility to the group as a whole, allowing each student to engage in a form of English communication under less pressure, and within the safety of the group. This gives shy students some of the benefits that come from making speeches in English but with less individual pressure.

Motivation and pressure intensify when students have to perform in front of an audience, as happens toward the end of the second semester each year at Kinsman's high school when their students sing in front of their peers and their parents. Because of the *Chorus English* approach, their performances have been remarkably good. Some students can even be heard singing lines from the songs spontaneously between classes.

The songs that teachers of young learners often use are pedagogical in nature, whereas they are authentic in *Chorus English*. Because they are not written for the classroom, grammatical structures, vocabulary, and speed of delivery must be carefully

considered when selecting songs. The teacher's role of song curator is essential. Arleo (2000) advises that the songs be "motivating and pedagogically useful" (p.12).

Chorus English can be a regular part of the curriculum, as in the case of authors' high school and college classes, or be used within existing EFL classes. Most of the authors' students eagerly complete the activities made to complement the songs we sing in class. However, students with very low language ability do occasionally require scaffolding to get to the Zone of Proximal Development required for learning, according to Vygotsky, as referenced by (Rogoff, 1999). Songs not resonating with the class, sometimes warrant revisiting an old favorite, thus flexibility in teaching is as important in *Chorus English*, as it is in any lesson.

Teachers can always demand a little more from their students once certain progress goals are reached, like singing while looking away from the lyrics, which forces students to process language in chunks. This could be done after practicing individual sounds and syllable stress. New vocabulary can be re-contextualized and practiced in related activities.

7. Conclusion

Not all activities using music in the classroom are created equal. Most aim to motivate the students and lower their affective filter. However, the activity that the teacher uses in class may or may not be successful from this standpoint. Even if efficacious, the lesson content that follows may be of little value or have little connection to the music used to

gain the students' interest. Songs in the classroom can suffer a similar fate.

More than a term, *Singing in the classroom* is also a behavior that can lead to language acquisition. *Chorus English* falls within this category but is precise in its content – the use of pop songs – and also precise in its aim – singing songs as a group with an acceptable level of prosody. It favors acquisition when possible, yet allows for activities frequently done by teachers who use songs in the classroom. *Chorus English* is a way for teenagers and young adults to improve not only listening and speaking skills and prosody, but also social skills in an enjoyable environment deepening their cultural understanding of English music.

8. Further Research

The authors intend to explore the topic of music in the classroom and its subcategories, especially, *Chorus English*. This research will take the form of both qualitative and quantitative research methods to identify students' reaction to *Chorus English* and seek to identify its benefits for learners of English in Japanese schools and colleges.

9. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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