

Effectiveness of Songs in an ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction

English language, apart from mere communication, is recognized as a prime employability skill in India. The English learning process has turned out to be stressful to most First Generation learners (FG) of English and the students of Underprivileged sectors of the country, due to the over hyped pressure entrusted on the students. Moreover, the teaching methodologies of English in India and the Instructional Materials (IMs) of English have failed drastically to cater the needs of the FG learners. As Love Joy states:

Instructional Materials (IMs) carry with them certain attitudes which are either favourable or biased towards learners and learning contexts. Often these attitudes are hidden either intentionally or unintentionally by the writers of IMs to promote specific perceptions on gender, class, ideology, faith and society. The First-Generation (FG) learners are often silent victims of such promotional attitudes because the textbook writers tend to largely ignore the contexts which represent the culture of FG learners. The fact that the IMs are devoid of relevant cultural contexts is a cause of worry since it impacts the learners' psychology who may feel excluded from the learning context creating a gap between them and the target language. Gradually, the gap widens with time as these learners climb up the educational ladder.

To enhance the learning process of students, the gap between the learner and the target language has to be reduced. Csikszentmihalyi points out that "There cannot be any learning unless a person is willing to invest attention." (12) In order to intensify the learners' attention the learner must be autonomous in choosing his / her learning material or the prescribed learning material should be interesting enough to the learner.

English Pronunciation

English Pronunciation, in general, is considered as a difficult and boring subject among the students and teachers. Teaching pronunciation through the teaching of phonetic symbols and phonetic transcriptions has not led to positive outcomes. Unlike the syntax and grammar, pronunciation cannot be learned by mind. It needs constant listening and practice, since, it involves muscles, jaw, lips and tongue in the articulation.

Using songs in the English language classroom is never new in the educational system. As Cekir states, "It has been said that children have a natural musical taste and that play is the only activity that they take seriously. If this is so, teachers should not let song practice or any activity seem like work. They should keep it spontaneous." Teachers are striving for creating innovative and successful methods using songs, which could cater to the present day needs of the students in learning pronunciation. Learning starts with music,

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when the English alphabet is taught using rhymes and hymns. Using songs in English language class comprises numerous advantages.

Motivation

Motivation is generally judged by the demonstration of the result. The sequential effect of motivation contains effort, orientation towards the goal and finally the enjoyment of the task. The motivation that songs create proves to be reversal, starting from the enjoyment of the task, leading towards the goal orientation and finally the efforts due to the motivation. On speaking about songs, Maley stated:

It is highly motivating, especially for children, adolescents, and young adult learners. Popular music in its many forms constitutes a powerful subculture with its own methodology, its own rituals, and its own priesthood. As such it is a part of students' lives in a way that so much else we use it not. If we can tap into it, we release unsuspected positive energy. (3)

Moreover, songs create a shared motivation among the teachers and the students. Making the uninterested students interested and the uncooperative students cooperative are the great challenges faced by teachers. Using songs in English language class makes the students relaxed and motivated, thereby delineating the elements of fear and shyness in the students. "The international appeal of music can unlock interest in even the shyest and most reserved students by engaging them in a real listening medium." (Cunningham, 2). Acquiring the concentration of the students becomes much easier as songs help to reduce the 'affective filter' of the students.

For the students, songs create an effective ambience, integrating concentration and interest. For the teachers, there is nothing more motivating than to see the students smile and enjoy the class.

Retention in long-term memory

The subjects learned through songs are retained in long-term memory. The lyrics get memorized along with the tune and get registered in the long term memory. The experience of working with various choirs, gives me valid evidence to the point. The songs taught long before could be sung by the choir without referring to the lyrics and so are the prayers sung as songs. The above mentioned examples give the valid evidence that song registers the data in long term memory and so are the linguistic data.

The difficulty is that to memorize material in foreign language is much difficult than memorizing it in the

native one. In the native language we know everything except the particular string in which the sentences and words appear. And memorizing this takes enormous effort and time. In the target language everything has to be memorized as if it were a series of nonsense syllables in strange sounds. The task is nonsense. (Lado, 62)

The words of Lado prove the complexity in memorizing data in the target language. Memorizing often turns out to be nonsense when done with strange sounds and syllables. Using songs in the classroom provides a different situation for the students. The memorization happens in the students without the consciousness of the students themselves. Maley has stated

Music is highly memorable. Whether this is because it creates a state of relaxed receptivity, or because its rhythms correspond in some way with basic body rhythms, or because its messages touch deep-seated emotional or aesthetic chords, or because its repetitive patterning reinforces learning without loss of motivation-whatever the reason, songs and music 'stick' in the head. (3)

Enhances listening skills

Songs help acquire deep concentration of human mind both at the conscious and the subconscious level. The songs heard even during sound sleep are often reflected during the day, lingering in the mind, which proves the high intensity at which songs work. This shows the relation between the songs and the subconscious mind, mediated by the listening skills. When songs are used in classrooms, the listening skills of the students can improve. The motivation that songs create helps the students to attend the class with interest, enhancing their listening skills.

The stress pattern of songs

Most songs in English follow the correct stress pattern, rising in the stressed syllables and falling in unstressed syllables. Flouting the rules of the pronunciation and composing songs would lack the linguistic quality and would sound absurd. Prolonging an unstressed syllable could make the lyrics unstable, changing the sound pattern of words. A composer by all means, obeys the stress patterns of the songs.

The song by Martin & Coulter is an apt example to describe the stress quality of a song.

Congratu'lation and celeb'ration

When I tell 'everyone that you're in
love with me.

Congratu'lation and jubi'lation

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I want the world to know I'm happy as can be.

The words ending with '-tion' have the stress on the penultimate syllable and the song well sustains the note on the penultimate syllable and shortens the ultimate syllable. So is the pronunciation and stress for the term 'everyone' which has its stress for the starting syllable.

Another example could be the song of Jackson, Bottrell & Riley "Dangerous". In the line "She is so 'Dangerous.'" When the word Dangerous is taken into consideration, it is rightly stressed on the first syllable and pronounced rightly as /'deɪndʒərəs /. The pronunciation of this word is found fault with many Indian students, stressing the penultimate syllable or replacing /e/ for /ei / in the word. Listening to such metalinguistic features of the song would help acquire its correct pronunciation.

English Phonemes in Songs

The emphasis for every individual phoneme and syllable in songs makes them referential and authentic. The pronunciations in the song are considered as important as the tune and music imposed in it and composer makes every effort to bring out the pronunciations right. Songs are thus carefully crafted with correct articulation of phonemes

A classical song of Richard & Welch could be an example for its clear articulation of phonemes.

When I was young my father said
Son I have something to say
And what he told me I will never forget
Until my dying day

All the phonemes, in the songs, are clearly articulated. Every syllable is given equal importance and the time signature of the song 3/4 helps for its proper segmentation.

Another religious song of Nystrom, shows the clear articulation of phonemes.

As the deer panteth for the water so my
Soul longeth after thee
You alone are my hearts desire and I
Long to worship thee.

Indian students have the tendency to pronounce every letter of the word. The term 'deer' is mispronounced as /diər /. While having the deep listening of the song, one can acquire the correct pronunciation of it as articulated in the song as /æz ð di: /.

The time signature of the song 2/4 also helps for the proper segmentation of the syllables and articulation of every phoneme. The songs of 3/4, 2/4 and 4/4 could be

the best to teach pronunciation and the language trainer should take effort of choosing the right song.

Attention and repetition

Lado has stated that "Attention and awareness, which are the capacity to perceive certain things, events, qualities, and effects, more consciously than others in a field, are important in language learning." (41). Attention is the most important aspect of any learning process. The learning is effective only when the learner decides to learn and spend his/her attention to the prescribed input. Songs highly succeed in this aspect of getting attention of the students. The students attend the classes with great interest. Shanker stated:

Songs particularly, may be chosen so that they are effective and engaging at almost any proficiency level. Song recording and video clips are particularly useful for NNS (nonnative speakers) teachers in EFL settings. Often in such situations few native speaker models are available, and teachers sometimes lack confidence in their ability to teach pronunciation. (216)

Another important aspect in any language learning is having a model. The learner acquires the language imitating the model. The model has to be very much perfect and flawless. Such a model, as Shanker suggests, could be found in the songs. May it be the pronunciation, grammar or sentence structure, songs would be perfect. Moreover, students follow their model with great interest when songs are used in the class room.

Having the model, the next step would be the imitation process of the students. The students try to imitate their model, which Lado calls it as "mimicry-memorization technique." (65) The students memorize and learn the language the language by imitating their model. Lado gives his following views about imitation. "Perception usually runs ahead of pronunciation. After perception comes imitation, the simplest form of pronunciation. Imitation is the most direct road to full pronunciation. When imitation works, go to the next stage: repetition..." (82)

As Lado suggests, the next step after imitation is repetition. When speaking about pronunciation and intonation Doff states, "The easiest way for students to practice stress and intonation is by repetition. If the focus is on pronunciation, traditional 'repetition drills' which are often boring for students to do, can be made interesting and challenging..." (120).

As Doff rightly points out, the best method for teaching intonation would be repetition, which is considered boring for the students. When songs are used

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in the class room, the students are made to sing the song many times. The repetition happens in the class room without the students getting bored. Moreover, students interestingly participate in the class, singing the songs, repeating and so on. The above mentioned repetition would be yet more interesting and useful, when happened in group. Lado states, "Group recitation offers clear advantages at the beginning of the drill. The student is less inhibited in a group response, he recites more readily, and everyone has a chance to practice every sentence." (66)

As mentioned above, students have the tendency to perform more readily in group. While using songs, the students participate in the class more readily and with more interest. Thus songs make all the above mentioned strategies of learning pronunciation more interesting and creative.

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