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The use of songs in the ESL classroom

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### **Abstract**

Nowadays, the use of songs in the ESL classroom is becoming more and more popular. The benefits of their use in order to learn a second language have been recognized. They are a great resource to get the children's attention when introducing a new topic or learning new vocabulary. Further, songs offer multiple possibilities to use them as a teaching or recreational tool. Teachers have frequently played music in order to catch the attention of their students or help them learn a concept that might be difficult or boring to learn through memorization. Music should be a source of enjoyment and pleasure that means fun, yet very young children are not able to listen for very long before becoming bored with inactivity. (Collins, & Wikinson, 2006)

In addition, integrating experiences with music in the early childhood supports English language learners' literacy development. (Peregoy and Boyle, 2008; Saricoban and Metin, 2000)

This article describes the contribution of the use of music in the ESL classroom with young English learners, as well as some advice teachers can follow in their classroom to make students' learning processes successful.

### **Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983)**

Howard Gardner proposed the theory of multiple intelligences in 1983. He stated that each student is unique and they learn in different ways. For this reason, the classrooms must provide different approaches to meet an individual student's areas of strength in order to be the most successful (Woodal & Ziembroski, 2008). Teachers should be conscious of this theory and should try to apply it as much as possible in their classroom. This theory supposes more work but teacher have to consider the learning differences in each student and their strong intelligence in order to exploit them as much as possible.

One of these intelligences is the musical intelligence. In fact, Gardner said that musical intelligence is the first intelligence to emerge in young learners. (Paquette & Rieg, 2008) Children with musical intelligence will benefit greatly from learning through songs. They are strong in singing, picking up songs, remembering melodies and rhythms; they like to sing, hum, play instruments and listen to music. (Mol, 2009) However, such talent does not mean that students with other intelligences cannot use songs to learn. They absolutely can learn from music; they can dance, perform theater, move creatively, make gestures and pursue other important activities that complement songs and improve their English language skills.

### **Songs Contribution**

The use of pop songs in the ESL classroom definitely helps young English learners. However, it is important to make a selection of songs before playing them in the classroom to make sure that they are suitable for a particular lesson. While selecting a song the teacher should take the age, interests of the learners and the language being used in the song into consideration. (Saricoban and Metin, 2000) Suitable songs in an ESL classroom should contain frequent, familiar and simple words and make the language approachable for the students. They should also be slightly slower than real songs and be full of repetitive words and grammatical structures.

**Songs promote interaction and fluency in ESL children.** In addition, music can focus the mind on the sound being perceived and promote learning through an interactive process. (Woodal & Ziembrski, 2008) Singing together means to have a good time and improve pronunciation. Following the same speed as the song helps to develop fluency. Also, listening to classmates singing helps the children to develop listening skills. ESL students, when asked to repeat, they give up the same melody, even if they are unable to pronounce the words correctly (Fonseca, 2000).

**Physical development.** Usually, using songs doesn't mean just singing them, they may also be complemented with gestures, clapping or dancing, among others. These activities suppose a physical development in the student and interaction throughout the classroom. The use of movements is a useful strategy that helps the students to remember the lyrics and identify a word with its gesture, learning new vocabulary. Further, through music, memory skills can be improved and aural discrimination increased. (Chong & Gan, 1997) Having two possibilities to express one meaning either, by speaking or movements, helps ELLs to remember the other one when we just remember one of them. The song "*Head, shoulders knees and toes*" is a clear example. This song is full of vocabulary words. All of them are parts of the body. While the students are singing they have to point to the part of the body they are saying. In addition, these vocabulary words follow an order. They go from the head till the feet making its memorization easier. "*If you are happy*" is another popular song for teaching English. Some of the lyrics are predetermined such as "Clap your hands", "Stamp your feet". However, the teacher can make up new structures with new vocabulary and expressions that can denote movement such as "Wave your hand", "Jump three times" or "Turn around".

**Mental training.** How many times are we singing a song without noticing it? And how many times we can't get rid of a song that is stuck in our head? Using a catchy song in the ESL classroom will help students to remember it and to develop their fluency. If that song contains an English pattern it will be easier to use it in real life and in a more natural way. Establishing routines in the classroom is a great idea to achieve this purpose. Playing the same song during several days and in the same conditions helps students to better assimilate the song. Complementing the song with some games or activities that include the repetitive vocabulary or grammar patterns will help students to understand an application of the song to daily life, so

teachers can assure that the kids understand the purpose of that song. The song “How are you” is a great song to teach answers to this question. Once the students have learned the meaning of all the answers that appear in the song, we can practice them by playing a game. The students are going to sit down in a circle. All the students will sing the beginning of the song: “Today is Monday, today is Monday” “Today I am sleepy, today I am sleepy”. Then, the teacher is going to stand up he/she will go next to a kid and say: “How are you, how are you?” and the kid will answer, “I am sleepy too, I am sleeping too”. Then, all the children will sing again “Today is Tuesday, today is Tuesday” “Today I am okay, today I am okay” Now the last kid has to go next to another kid and continue the song and so on. When they answer they can use gestures such as two hands together on the cheek while inclining the head to represent “sleepy” or a thumb up to represent “ok”.

**Cultural awareness.** Through songs we can also teach our students traditions and culture of English speaking countries. Christmas songs, Halloween songs and popular English songs provide a lot of information about life style in these countries. Songs such as “*Rocking around the Christmas tree, Rudolph the red nose reindeer, London Bridge is falling down and Knock Knock, Trick or Treat*” are excellent resources to show students some characteristics of these countries’ culture. For instance, “*Knock Knock, Trick or Treat*” can be used to introduce Halloween to the smallest learners. We can explain that “Knock knock” is the sound we make when we “gently hit” doors in Halloween to ask for candy. “Trick or treat” is an expression that means that the one who opens the door has two options: give candy to the children or get a trick. In addition, it is important to talk with children about the music they listen to and sing, so they are aware that different cultural groups listen to and sing various kinds of music. (Paquette & Rieg, 2008) These songs can introduce a thematic unit or be part of another theme. It is sure that

children will likely love such songs and will have a great time in the ESL classroom. This kind of song increases motivation in the ESL classroom, and students are usually looking forward to learning new songs.

**Teaching language skills.** Also, songs can help teach sounds. Children love singing and learning new things. Why don't we do it through songs? A carefully chosen song allows the child to practice a new sound or sound position without producing boredom. (Richards, 1969) For example, "*Row, Row, Row, Your Boat*" helps students to pronounce the /r/ sound.

Additionally, listening to songs helps our students to be conscious of word stress, intonation and rhythm. Developing the suprasegmental speech is very important to speak clearly. Songs are perfect tools to improve this feature of students' English speech. "*One potato, two potatoes*" and "*Who took the cookie?*" are excellent nursery rhymes to work on prosody. Since some languages have a syllable-timed rhythm, this kind of song will help students to develop a stress rhythm in their spoken English. "*Rock, scissors and paper*" is also a great song to work on stress. What is more, these songs allow the students to develop their creativity and vocabulary.

**Teaching English expressions.** There are some other songs that can help to develop everyday frequent expressions such as "*Hello*". This song is aimed for kids that are 3 or 4 years old because of its simplicity and it is great to use at the beginning of the class and at the end of it. It can be used to encourage kids to express different degrees of feelings, rather than just saying "fine" or robotically replying "I'm fine thank you and you?". The song can be sung in a circle or in two lines facing one another. These songs are full of repetition of some patterns of English. Through such songs, kids are able to remember the lyrics easily and consequently they can apply these expressions in daily life more naturally.

**Teaching grammar.** Another way to teach sentence patterns and syntax is through songs such as “*Do you have it? Yes, I have*” or “*Can you do it? Yes I can*”. These songs are made up of questions and answers. They are very simple and teach a straightforward message. They also teach important necessary grammar features.

**Teaching vocabulary.** But in general, most of the time teachers use songs to teach new vocabulary with songs such as “*Head, shoulders, knees and toes or I see something blue*”. These songs can be complemented with gestures that make the song more exciting and easier to learn. For example, “*I see something new*” helps the teacher to check if their students know the colors. In this song children have to look for objects that are of the same color as the one that the song says and touch them. This song requires a big classroom without tables to move around easier.

**Teaching a lesson.** Sometimes songs can teach a lesson. Research demonstrates that children memorize information better through songs. *Rainbow song* by Suzy Gazlay is an example of how to learn how is the rainbow formed:

*How we love to see a rainbow  
Telling us the storm is through;  
Made when sunlight shines on raindrops:  
Here's a rainbow just for you!*

*Red – the top, the highest color;  
Orange- we'll find it just below;  
Yellow follows, bright and sunny;  
Green – the middle one, we know.*

*Blue comes next, like sky in summer,  
Indigo is purple- blue;  
Violet, the bottom color.  
There's a rainbow just for you!*

**Teaching writing.** Writing skills can be improved through songs. We can provide our students with a nursery song. Then, in groups they have to modify the song by changing some

words or structure patterns by others. Through this process ELLs will develop their creativity and fluency. Listening to song parodies is an excellent way to demonstrate how others have taken older songs and have made them originals. After teacher modeling, students will be prepared to write and to sing their unique song parodies. (Paquette & Rieg, 2008) We can also give the student a topic, such as animals and create a song that has vocabulary of the animals. This activity seems a lot of fun and it will foment interaction among students. Another way to promote writing through music is make children create song illustrations that visually represent their aesthetic interpretations of the song. (Paquette & Rieg, 2008)

**Songs help with transitions.** Some songs can help teachers to make transitions in the classroom. For example, when it is time to tidy up we can play the “*Tidy up song*”. Teachers can explain the students that they have the time that the song lasts to tidy up the classroom and sit down in their places. This song is a great resource to motivate students to clean up the classroom. Making this song as a routine will be a good idea because kids can identify the cleaning up with the song every time they hear this music.

### **Songs Can Unteach**

However, we must not forget that before playing a song we have to make sure that it is suitable for the lesson we want to teach. Sometimes real songs are not useful for teaching ESL students. In fact many of them can confuse our students. Some songs, for instance, contain slang or offensive words, there may be grammatical mistakes and they may only marginally teach the language points you want to focus on. (Mol, 2009) For this reason, we have to make sure that the words we sing are frequent and useful words, syllables are stressed or unstressed according to the patterns of spoken English, and the grammar of the songs belong to normal English. (Richards, 1969)

### **Integrating New Songs in the Classroom**

Before using a song in the classroom it is important to make sure that the words and sentence patterns in it have been already taught. (Richards, 1969) Sometimes, playing the song in the background before it is introduced to the students is a good idea because it will become familiar the day the song is presented in class. At first, we should focus on the chorus or the most repeated part of the song. They usually contain the key points of the song and they are easier to learn than the verses. When the time to sing comes, let the children sing with the song first and then without the music. By this way, you can check whether they have learned the lyrics and their pronunciation. If there is any word that the students do not understand you can write it on the blackboard and explain the meaning of the word to them. Making sure that they understand what they are singing is important.

### **Conclusion**

Integrating music into children's everyday activities promotes literacy development, particularly with ELLs. (Paquette & Rieg, 2008) Songs are one of the most enchanting and culturally rich resources that can easily be used in language classrooms. (Saricoban and Metin, 2000) Songs help students to develop abilities in reading, speaking, listening and writing. Music transforms the classroom in a positive, enjoyable and grateful environment where students are motivated and eager to learn. Making the ESL classroom comfortable for the students is the first point when teaching a second language.

Having fun during the learning process is essential. In fact, songs make the experience of learning English a child-centered and enjoyable one (Richards, 1969) They encourage students to express themselves and interact with their classmates improving, by this way, their fluency.

Songs definitely are a great resource to motivate students' creativity and help them grow academically, socially, and personally.

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APPENDIX A

Cited songs:

Cited songs can be found in the following sources:

Super Simple Songs CD1

*-If you are happy.*

*-Head, shoulders, knees and toes.*

*-I see something blue.*

Super Simple Songs CD2

*-Who took the cookie?*

*-Rock, scissors and paper.*

*-Hello!*

*-One potato, two potatoes.*

Super Simple Halloween Songs

*-Knock Knock, Trick or Treat?*

YouTube

*-The Tidy Up Song by ExplodingPotatoes.com.*

[www.wearebusybeavers.com](http://www.wearebusybeavers.com)

*-Do you have it? Yes, I have.*

*-Can you do it? Yes, I can.*

*-How are you?*

[www.kidsstuffandthings.com](http://www.kidsstuffandthings.com)

*-Row, Row, Row, Your Boat.*

*-London Bridge is Falling Down*

Other

*-Rocking around the Christmas tree by Brenda Lee.*

*-Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer by Jonny Marks.*

*-Rainbow songs by Suzy Gazlay.*