

LEARNERS' VIEWS ON THE USE OF SONG IN AN ESOL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

There has been little research on the use of song in second language learning, but there are many published teacher accounts which provide evidence of teacher enthusiasm for using the technique and of their beliefs about its benefits. This article reports on a study of how learners view the use of song in their adult ESOL community class in Wellington, New Zealand. Learners were interviewed in English and in their native languages. The findings show that these learners believe that songs can benefit language learning in many ways. We suggest that the class teacher's explanations to the class about the purposes and value of using song may have contributed to the learners' positive responses.

Introduction

Songs have been used for many centuries as an educational tool. Songs were an important part of language learning in the Middle Ages when students were introduced to a second language in what was known as a "song" school (Karimer, 1984). With chanting, students were drilled in the rhythm, rhyme and flow of the second language (usually Latin) before formal study took place. In a later century, William Byrd (1588, cited in Osman and McConochie, 1978, p.2) noted:

reasons briefly set downe ... to perswade everyone to learne to sing. It is a singular good remedie for a stutting & stammering in the speech. It is the best meanes to procure a perfect pronounciation & to make a good orator.

However, there have been very few examples of research into the effects of song on second language learning. This lack of research is noted by each of the few studies located. Hahn (1972) found that songs were effective in the learning and retention of lexical items in German for boys in a group of mid-western junior high school students but for girls song was no more effective than the use of dialogues. However, responding to a questionnaire, the girls noted that they enjoyed songs more than dialogues. Karimer (1984) found that songs were slightly more effective than minimal pairs to train adult South East Asian learners to distinguish similar and dissimilar phonemes. Medina (1990) reports no statistically significant results between groups of second grade ESOL children who used music and illustrations to assist vocabulary acquisition and those who learned vocabulary from oral stories. Nevertheless, the group of 23 children who took part in the study reported that they preferred the song treatment. Wilcox (1995) discovered no significant difference in memory for pronunciation between two groups of adult learners – one which used classroom singing and one which used direct pronunciation drills and practice.

Although these few research studies report only neutral or mildly positive effects for the value of song in second language learning, teachers are often very positive about its

value. For example, Oxman (1975) surveyed by questionnaire a group of teachers who were piloting a second language programme that used songs as the basis of instruction. Sixty-six percent of the teachers reported that the programme had a positive effect on students' ability to speak English; 85% reported a positive effect on general academic achievement; 100% reported a positive effect on attendance and 87% reported that the programme had a positive effect on student attitudes to education.

Teacher accounts of the use of song

Teachers' beliefs about the value of song are also evident in the many published teacher accounts of the use of this technique. These are usually based on intuitions and on the teachers' observations of their own classrooms. We list in Table 1 the many benefits of song that are claimed in teacher reports.

Table 1: Benefits of song claimed in published teacher reports

Benefits of song claimed in teacher reports	Examples of relevant teacher reports
Cultivates a relaxed classroom atmosphere	Gugliemino, 1986; Jolly, 1975; Mora, 2000
Encourages class participation	Abbott, 2002; Gatti-Taylor, 1980; Orlova, 1997
Encourages class bonding	Lems, 1996; Riddiford, 1998
Caters for many learning styles	Gugliemino, 1986; Riddiford, 1998
Provides a change of pace	Coromina, 1993; Jolly, 1975; Riddiford, 1998
Motivates learners to learn the second language	Abbott, 2002; Mora, 2000; Orlova, 1997
Helps the study of language functions and grammatical structures in context	Jolly, 1975; Riddiford, 1998; Urbanic & Vizmuller, 1981
Helps the learning of vocabulary, collocations and idioms	Abbott, 2002; Gatti-Taylor, 1980; Gugliemino, 1986
Helps the study and practice of pronunciation, stress and rhythm	Coromina, 1993; Jolly, 1975 ; Riddiford, 1998
Provides listening comprehension practice	Coromina, 1993; Lo & Chi Fai Li, 1998; Yang, 1996
Provides repetition and practice	Abbott, 2002; Gugliemino, 1986; Riddiford, 1998
Provides a basis for discussion	Coromino, 1993; Orlova, 1997
Provides cultural information	Gugliemino, 1986; Orlova, 1997
Facilitates reading in the second language	Harp, 1988; Lo & Chi Fai Li, 1998
Provides a basis for the study of a literary genre	Abrate, 1983; Gatti-Taylor, 1980

Such teacher accounts are ample evidence that some teachers, at least, have strong views about the positive value of using song in the ESOL classroom. In this article, we explore

how learners view the use of song and we report on a study of learners' views on the value of song in their adult ESOL community class in Wellington.

Learners' views on the use of song

Nunan (1987, p.180) notes that one of the most serious blocks to learning is the mismatch between teacher and learner perceptions about what should happen in the classroom. He cites three survey studies in the Australian Migrant Education Programme which show that teachers place a reasonably high value on songs and similar activities such as games, but students' reactions are mixed (Alcorso & Kalantzis, 1985; Brindley, 1984; Willing, 1988). Alcorso and Kalantzis found that views on games, singing and dance varied greatly. They also discovered that the divergence of opinion seemed to relate to learners' educational background and socio-economic position: "The most common comment from high school or tertiary educated migrants was that in general, singing, dance and games were a waste of time" (Alcorso & Kalantzis, 1985, p.48, cited in Nunan, 1987, p.180). Other learners were quoted as saying "I don't want to clap and sing. I want to learn English" (Brindley, 1984, p.96, cited in Nunan 1987, p.186). On the other hand, Green (1993) reports in a survey study that students attending a university English course in Puerto Rico prior to embarking on academic studies considered that songs were both highly enjoyable and effective.

Accounts of positive learner responses to the use of song emerge from reports of action research undertaken by teachers in their own classrooms. Whittaker (1981) relates that 81% of her adult learners reported that singing songs was both an enjoyable activity and that it helped with language improvement. Not only did the learners find songs relaxing but they believed that songs helped them learn grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation and idioms. Anton (1990) surveyed 23 university students learning Spanish as a second language. Ninety-three percent of the students reported that they enjoyed songs and 98% reported that this technique helped with language learning. Jolly (1975) surveyed two groups of university students learning conversational Japanese and found that 80% of one group and 91% of the other rated songs as very useful. Students commented that songs contributed to learning vocabulary, learning about Japanese culture, creating a relaxed and enjoyable classroom atmosphere and enlivening the pace of lessons.

Some teachers provide more informal, observational evidence of student perception of song. For example, Sibarah (1999, p.15) relates his experience in Cameroon:

Nowadays, I do not need the tolling of the bell to announce the beginning of the English period. As soon as the mathematics teacher, who precedes me, finishes and I step into the classroom, my students start singing our latest song.

The Wellington study

The class chosen for the study was an adult ESOL community class that operated within the community education programme of a large secondary school in Wellington, New Zealand. The class was chosen because the teacher was known to use song in her classroom, and she and the members of the class were willing to participate in the study and have a researcher visit their classes regularly. The class operated for four ten-week terms each year and met twice weekly for a two-hour lesson. The data collection for this study took place in the third term.

The design of the English course reflected the language the students needed for successful interaction in the community and the focus was on the functional rather than the grammatical aspects of language. The teacher used songs in a variety of ways: as a warm-up activity, as instruction in a structure, to reinforce the language focus of a lesson, to revise language previously taught, as a pace-changer, as a gap-filler, as background music for a game, and as a concluding activity.

Participants

Class members came from a range of backgrounds: Cambodian (5), Thai (4), Chinese (2), Taiwanese (2), Assyrian (1), Iranian (1), Malaysian Chinese (1), Peruvian (1) and Somali (1). There were 13 women and 5 men. The class had a wide range of ages with some learners in their early twenties, several in their thirties, forties and fifties, and a few in their sixties and seventies.

Students' residence in New Zealand ranged from three months to six years. Thirteen students were permanent residents, seven of whom were refugees. Five students held visitors' permits or work permits. As this was a daytime class, the learners who attended were mainly those who had school-aged children, those who worked part-time or were unemployed, or those who were retired.

The educational background of the learners varied from minimal schooling because of civil war or cultural limitations on the education of women, to some with university degrees. The majority had received secondary schooling. One learner had never attended school. The amount of prior English language tuition ranged from eight years' formal English study at school to study begun two months earlier in New Zealand.

Data collection

For this study of learners' views, interviews in English and in learners' first languages (L1) were carried out. The level of English proficiency of the learners ranged from very low intermediate to mid-intermediate. As a result, many of the learners had some difficulty expressing themselves in detail in the English interviews. The inclusion of L1 interviews helped to minimise problems associated with these language difficulties.

The first author interviewed 13 of the 18 class members in English (see Appendix for a list of the interview questions). Five were not interviewed in English because they were absent from class when the interviews were held. The interviews were recorded on audiotape.

There were four L1 interviewers, all women from an advanced class who were studying at the same premises as the class chosen for the study. The L1 interviewers were all volunteers. Their native languages were Arabic, Mandarin, Persian and Thai. The learners who were invited to be involved in the L1 interviews were those who shared the native languages of the available L1 interviewers.

Five class members took part in the L1 interviews. Two were interviewed in Thai, and one each in Arabic, Mandarin and Persian. These interviews were held after all the English language interviews were completed. The L1 interviewers recorded the interview on audiotape and translated the interview for the researcher either immediately afterwards or, in one case, three days later. The translation process was also recorded on audiotape.

The level of English proficiency of the L1 interviewers varied from high intermediate to advanced. Occasionally, the data generated from the L1 interviews were limited by an inability on the part of the L1 interviewer to express the opinions of her interviewee in English. However, overall, the data from the L1 interviews were very valuable.

In order to facilitate the observation of convergent or differing views, the L1 interview questions were the same as those asked in the English interview. There was an interval of at least one week between the English and L1 interviews to reduce any practice effect that might have led to unconsidered responses. It would have been ideal if all learners in the class could have been interviewed in their L1 but it was not possible to arrange enough L1 interviewers. Nevertheless, the data generated from the combination of L1 and English interviews were sufficiently varied and detailed to provide very useful material for analysis.

Data analysis

The data from the interviews were analysed after all the responses had been collected and transcribed. Recurring themes in the data were identified through a process of repeated readings of the transcribed material. The themes emerged from the data, rather than being imposed on it. At several stages, the transcribed data were rechecked against the audiotapes to confirm the accuracy of the transcription.

Findings

All learners reported that the use of songs helped with language learning. Responses from learners varied in intensity but many learners believed that songs not only made a contribution to language learning but that this contribution was very significant. Learners offered a range of general comments when asked why singing songs helped them learn English. In this section, EI stands for English Interview and L1I stands for L1 interview. All names are pseudonyms.

It is very useful to use songs to learn English. It is a good idea. It can help me learn English easier (Hui Lan, L1I).

They are very good for my language. It is easier to give us the knowledge and words in a song, and we like it (Leia, L1I).

Singing helps me to speak English good (Kim Chi, EI).

More English is coming when I sing (Faiza, EI).

I enjoy and learn faster than with no singing (Shahla, EI).

When I sing I learn and I understand (Ly Eang, EI).

Learners offered a number of very specific comments about the benefits of song in the English language classroom. Table 2 lists the features of song that the participants in the study noted. The first column lists benefits of the use of song identified by the participants. The second column gives the number of comments made by learners in the English language interviews (EI). The third column gives the number of responses made by learners in the native language interviews (L1I).

Table 2 Benefits of song identified by learners in interviews

Benefits of song	Learner EI comments	Learner L1I comments	Total student comments (EI+L1I)
Maximum number of comments possible	13	5	18
Enhances learning environment	0	1	1
Helps relaxation	1	4	5
Encourages laughter	0	1	1
Builds confidence	1	1	2
Encourages positive feelings	13	5	18
Helps enjoyment of learning	1	1	2
Energises	1	3	4
Suits all learners	0	1	1
Helps the memory	2	3	5
Helps remember vocabulary	13	5	18
Provides repetition and practice	4	2	6
Helps speaking	6	2	8
Helps language knowledge	1	1	2
Helps learn vocabulary	2	3	5
Helps learn useful language	2	3	5
Helps learn idiom	0	1	1

One learner in a L1 interview mentioned that songs facilitated the development of a classroom environment that helped learning:

When I am singing I feel good because it is not serious. Singing helps us to relax and allows us to learn better because the environment helps us to learn more (Prapai, L1I).

Others, like Prapai in the above response, also identified relaxation as a benefit of songs, for example:

When I sing songs in the class I feel very happy and very relaxed. There is no pressure (Hui Lan, L1I).

Prapai further noted that the laughter that can accompany a song contributes to relaxation:

Sometimes the teacher uses a funny song and I feel relaxed and laugh in the class (Prapai, L1I).

Oxford (1999) believes that a relaxed classroom environment is an essential condition for effective learning. The student comments indicate that song succeeded in creating this relaxing environment.

Another aspect of the classroom environment that learners mentioned was that songs helped build confidence, for example:

When I sing I feel I can speak the language easily (Nirut, EI).

All learners in the study reported that singing songs in the English class encouraged positive feelings. One learner mentioned that singing songs could intensify positive feelings:

I sing when I am happy and then I feel more happy and excited (Leia, L1I).

Learners indicated that singing helped them enjoy learning, for example:

I enjoy and learn faster than with no singing. Students enjoy singing and don't get bored (Shahla, L1I).

The learners' enjoyment of song suggests that song may be an example of an intrinsically motivating teaching technique of the kind that Brown (1994) regards as essential for effective language learning.

Four learner comments suggested that singing was energising, for example,

Songs help me feel less tired (Shahla, L1I).

They can wake up the brain and then we can learn English quickly (Hui Lan, L1I).

One learner commented that she felt that songs were suitable for all learners:

I really enjoy it when we sing songs. I am happy. I remember English more. It is good for all the class (Shahla, L1I).

When asked how songs helped with language acquisition, a number of learners commented on the power of songs to aid the memory, for example:

It is easy to keep English in my mind (Hui Lan, EI).

It is exciting and it fixes in our minds. ... the songs remain in the mind more than usual studying (Leia, L1I).

Usually the teacher uses a song with a story. It is helpful to me because I remember the sentences in a song (Prapai L1I).

Nirut, however, said that he found songs hard to remember if he did not read them again at home (L1I).

Several learners mentioned that songs provided repetition and practice of the language, for example:

Songs repeat so it helps us to remember. We can remember words and sentences ... when we go home we can repeat the singing again and again and then learn more English (Hui Lan, L1I).

Songs repeat and repeat. When I first hear a song I can't pick out any words but after I hear it many times I can pick out the words (Prapai, L1I).

Some participants mentioned that songs helped language learning by encouraging confidence in speaking, for example:

I like singing songs as they help me to try to say more in English (Faiza, EI).

Other comments from learners were even more specific, noting that songs helped with particular speaking skills such as pronunciation and stress:

When I hear the song I can learn the pronunciation better. When I listen to an English song I try to get the English accent. I can accent the stressed and unstressed sounds when I hear them in a song. English songs help me more than reading (Nirut, L1I).

Two comments pointed out that songs also helped with language knowledge. As Leia remarked:

Sarah [the teacher] is trying hard to give us the knowledge in different ways. She knows that it is easier to give us the knowledge in a song and we like it (Leia, L1I).

Five learners stated that songs helped with learning vocabulary, for example:

Singing is a good way to learn vocabulary and the meanings of vocabulary (Prapai L1I).

Songs are a useful way of learning vocabulary as when the teacher presents a song she explains the vocabulary (Nirut, L1I).

One learner remarked that songs helped her become familiar with idiomatic language:

When I hear a song and listen to people speaking I will know the slang (Prapai, L1I).

Several learners noted that songs help the learning of useful language which can be transferred to other situations, for example:

I learn certain sentences from a song that I listen to that I can then use in a dialogue. I can use them in my life... I can apply the words to another sentence, for example, I'm going swimming can be applied to I'm going shopping (Prapai, L1I).

When I have a song I look for words and sentences that I can use in another place (Nirut, E1).

The learners' idea of transferable language may well refer to the same concept of "pre-fabricated chunks of language" that Ur (2000), Kasper (2000) and Ellis (1994) believe are essential components of fluency. It may be suggested that since it is probable that songs are stored in the memory as chunks (Nation, 2002, p.321) they are an ideal way of introducing and facilitating the memorisation of formulaic speech, phrases and collocations. Ur (2000) supports this view and acknowledges the need for learners to learn language chunks that exemplify particular grammatical structures. Ur proposes the use of songs, rhymes and chants to teach these chunks. Pre-fabricated chunks, once memorised in a song, can support the development of early fluency and, when analysed, support a developing awareness of language structure.

As can be seen from the many examples of learner comments, the learners in this study considered that song's contribution to language learning had many dimensions. This interview study of learners' views was part of a larger study (Riddiford, 2000) which included observation of the class's programme and the behaviour of the learners in the class. Evidence from the larger study confirmed these findings about the learners' views.

Discussion

The data in Table 2 show that all the learners interviewed reported that songs helped with the encouragement of positive feelings and with the remembering of vocabulary. The

large number of responses about these two particular benefits in comparison to the number of responses about other features does not necessarily reflect a view that these benefits were considered to be the most important aspects of songs. It is more likely that they reflect the type of questions employed in the interview.

The question that related to encouraging positive feelings specifically asked learners how singing songs in the class made them feel (Appendix, Question 9). The fact that all learners reported positive feelings indicates a view of song as beneficial, but because comments on this aspect were specifically elicited, no particular significance should be attached to the large number of responses.

The question that related to songs helping with memorisation of vocabulary (Appendix, Question 21) was of the closed yes/no variety. This type of question was included in the interview to provide an easier option to the more challenging questions that surrounded it. A further reason for asking this question in this manner was that it reflected a fairly widely held belief about songs that learners could comment on. Again, no particular significance should be attached to the large number of responses.

Although the responses to these questions need to be interpreted with caution, the fact that all learners responded positively indicates that they considered the features of song addressed in the questions to be very beneficial for language learning. All other responses from learners that related to the benefits of song were elicited with the help of the open-ended question: 'How, or in what ways? (does singing English songs help you learn English)' and were therefore spontaneous, unprompted comments (see Appendix).

The second column in Table 2 reveals that, in the English language interviews, learners nominated a comparatively small number of beneficial features of song. This lack of expansiveness probably reflects the difficulty that many of the learners interviewed had in expressing themselves in English. Apart from songs encouraging positive feelings and helping memorisation of vocabulary (already discussed above), the most frequently mentioned benefits for songs in the English interviews were providing repetition and practice, and helping with speaking.

The figures in the third column in Table 2 summarise comments made by learners in their L1. As expected, the responses from the L1 interviews were more wide-ranging and elaborate than comments made in the English language interviews. Most of the more reflective responses came from the L1 interviews, even though the questions asked in the native language interviews were the same as those asked in the English interviews. The heightened complexity and greater detail in responses that the L1 interviews supplied well justified their inclusion in this study.

It is worth noting that the interviewees knew well before their first interview (in English) that the research study was about "songs and learning English" because this had been explained to them through the information and consent form process. So they had the opportunity to think about the topic in advance of their interviews, though they were not given the specific questions in advance. Similarly, the more detailed and complex responses in the second interviews (in L1) could be partially attributable to further time to think about the topic and the specific questions between the interviews. In future studies of this sort, there are at least two ways in which this issue could be explored: (i) have some second interviews in English, and (ii) change the order of interviews for some interviewees, that is, English then L1 for some learners and L1 then English for others.

Apart from encouraging positive feelings and helping with memorisation of vocabulary (already discussed above), the most frequently mentioned benefits of songs in the L1

interviews were helping with relaxation, helping the memory, energising learners and helping the learning of vocabulary and useful, transferable language.

Learners usually offered more ideas, examples and explanations in the L1 interviews than in the English interviews, but the views expressed in the two languages were consistent. There was only one case in this study in which a learner presented contrary views in the English and L1 interviews. Nirut noted in the English interview that he liked singing songs at home and in the L1 interview that he didn't like singing at home and preferred listening to songs.

Implications for research

An important aspect of the methodology of this research was the inclusion of L1 interviews. These interviews provided a level of complexity and detail that was not reached in the English interviews. The L1 interviews added information that provided both fine-tuning and significant expansion of comments made in the English interviews. The inclusion of the L1 interviews greatly strengthened the validity and richness of the data. The value of the addition of this type of interview merits consideration in any future research, including teachers' action research in their own classrooms. This research study was carried out by an outside researcher, but the L1 interview process developed for the study could also be used by teacher researchers. The L1 interviewers/translators were advanced English learners, not professional interviewers or translators. The process of recording interviews then translating them later, in discussion with the researcher, rather than attempting simultaneous interpreting, made the task manageable for the L1 interviewers. After working through the process, the interviewers commented that they found it useful English language practice for themselves.

Implications for teachers

The findings of this study suggest that learners believe that songs can benefit language learning in many ways, ranging from promoting positive affective factors and aiding the memory to providing a vehicle for language focus and practice. This positive evidence of learner belief in the value of song as a teaching and learning technique may encourage language teachers to use songs and to employ them in a variety of ways in the classroom.

At the same time, as with any technique, the importance of explaining to learners the value and purpose of singing songs cannot be overemphasised. Evidence from observational and teacher interview components of the larger study (Riddiford, 2000) showed that the class teacher had a principled and coherent approach to song, and that she explained to the class why she used song and how song could support language learning. These explanations may well have contributed to learners' positive responses to the technique. It is possible that some of the negative attitudes to songs mentioned in the previous literature on learner views resulted from a lack of awareness of the value of songs in learning a language. As Cotterall (1995, p.195) notes "[student] beliefs will affect (and sometimes inhibit) learners' receptiveness to the ideas and activities presented in the language class particularly when the approach is not consonant with the learner's experience."

The findings of the study reported here of learners' views on the use of song suggest that ESOL teachers would be wise to heed Kern's (1995, p.81) advice that "by listening closely to our students, by identifying mismatches in beliefs, and by clearly explaining

why we do what we do in the classroom, it may be possible to significantly allay student frustration”.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

What is your name? Where do you come from? What language do you speak?

How long have you been living in New Zealand? How long have you been learning English?

Do you like singing? Do you sing songs at home? Do you sing songs in your language? How does singing make you feel? What kinds of songs do you like singing?

Did you sing songs at school in your country? How old were you when you left school?

Do you sing songs in Sarah's class every day? If not every day, how often do you sing songs in the class?

Do you like singing songs in the English class? Why? Or why not? When you sing in the class how do you feel?

Do you think singing English songs helps you learn English? How, or in what ways? Or why not?

Does singing help you to remember the words of the song/new English words?

Why do you think Sarah uses songs in her lessons?

Sarah often explains why she is using a song in the class. Can you remember some of the reasons she gives? Do you agree with the reasons she gives? Is it helpful for you when Sarah tells you the reason for using a song in the English class?

Do you sing songs at home that you have learned at school? Which songs have you learned in the English class? Which ones do you sing at home? Which songs do you like best? Are the songs easy to sing?

Sarah is very relaxed when she sings a song in the class. Does this influence the way you feel about singing in the class?

Would you like to say anything else about using songs to learn English?

