A Window into Writing Musical Materials for Young English Language Learners

Introduction

When observed through the filter of years as a professional singer-songwriter, music for the young learner EFL classroom takes on a much different meaning than it does for most classroom teachers. Many teachers of young EFL learners use rhythm and music in the classroom because it is "fun". Although affective considerations are crucial, well-chosen musical materials can work to aid language learning and support memory. Years spent teaching English to Japanese children have illuminated how aspects of music and rhythm support the principles of how children learn. While most teachers are limited to commercially available materials, I draw on my musical past, MSc TEYL study and first-hand experience in the young learner classroom to write songs and chants that meet the needs of my students. Whether practicing pronunciation, reinforcing vocabulary or supporting reading, musical materials must be carefully designed to be appropriate for and accessible to young learners. In this chapter I will explain how I write songs and chants for young English language learners. By providing this window into the creative process, I aim to alert teachers to what must be kept in mind when "choosing and using" effective musical materials for the language classroom.

The Natural Connection between Music and English Pronunciation

English is a stress-timed language with a characteristic "rhythm in which stressed syllables tend to reoccur at regular intervals of time and the length of an utterance depends on the number of stresses rather that the number of syllables" (Richards and Schmidt 2002, 517). Carolyn Graham, the originator of *Jazz Chants* discovered the similarity between spoken English and the characteristic rhythm of American jazz by chance. While playing piano and talking with a friend, one day, she noticed how remarkably similar spoken English is to the simple 4-beat structure of American jazz (Graham, personal communication, 2009). In other words, speakers of English naturally speak in a rhythm that is similar to the way jazz musicians play, with 4 evenly timed beats. Jazz music has both rhythm and melody and although melody has a role to play in spoken English, it was the rhythm that caught the attention of Carolyn Graham. As well as being a musician she was also an English teacher and she researched this discovery in her English classes. By speaking to a simple 4-beat rhythm instead of singing a melody Graham found that students were able to understand the concept and significance of stressed (strong) and unstressed (weak) syllables in spoken English. These musical pieces are called "chants". Graham then went on to publish volumes of Jazz Chants as a way to help students of English practice and understand the feel of natural spoken English.

English speakers stress words that convey the meaning. These *content words* are louder and more pronounced than other words, occur at regularly timed intervals and are therefore comparatively easy to hear. Listening for content words helps listeners understand both the specific information and the gist of an utterance or conversation. At the same time, every word in English has a stressed syllable. English speakers naturally time their speaking, speeding up and slowing down, so that the stressed syllable of the content words land on a natural stress point, shown below as ■.

1			2				3				4		
He	is	a	**doc**	tor	and	his	**sis**	ter	is	a	li	**bra**	ri an.
■	•	•	■	•	•	•	■	•	•	•	•	■	• •

We do the same when we sing. As a singer, I know the importance of timing the lyric of the song so that the stressed syllable of the content word lands on the strong beat of the music. Songwriters must be mindful of content words when "text-setting" or writing the words to a song. Placing the content words on the strong beats of the music is important for creating meaning and evoking emotion. Gordon, Magne, and Large (2011) found that when linguistic stress and musical meter in songs are aligned there is synchronization of neural activity with strong beats which enhances comprehension of lyric. They report on research that shows a greater understanding of sung lyrics when strong syllables are aligned with strong metric positions in the music. Like music, there is melody in spoken English which we call intonation. This rising and falling of pitch, cues listeners to meaning, providing listeners with signals such as when the speaker is finished their turn at talk or when questions are being asked. Understanding the similarities between spoken English and music is critical to modeling pronunciation and teaching English prosody. Knowing how melody, rhythm and stress interact to create meaning in English is extremely important for an EFL educational songwriter.

Music and Young EFL Learners

"Music is a rich source of patterns and children naturally seek patterns in connecting new learning to old and attaching meaning to new experiences" (Thain 2010, 412) . Cameron (2001) reminds us that when teaching children, *meaning* must come first. The brain looks for patterns through which to organize information according to schematic maps and categories. "As young learners in language classes search for meaning in the experiences we provide for them, we must be sure to create complex, meaningful experiences from which they construct their own patterns of understanding" (Curtain and Dahlberg 2010, 8). There are patterns in the rhyme schemes, the organization of verses and choruses, lexical patterns in the lyric, patterns in the melody and the rhythm and these all work together and interact to facilitate memory and recall (Thain 2012). Fonseca-Mora (2000) tells us that music can anchor learning as well as cue or prompt recall "through the use of melody, rhythm, rhyme repetition and in essence, the use of patterns" (151).

Most would agree that music in the young learner classroom tends to contribute to a positive and enjoyable atmosphere. Acquisition happens in learning environments where the *affective filter* is low, where there is little or no anxiety or distress to the learner (Krashen 1981). Krashen also cautions "that children are known to resist learning when learning is unpleasant, painful or being attempted in a punitive environment" (as cited in Curtain and Dahlberg 2010, 10), or in the absence of motivation. In the case of young language learners, the affective contribution is decisive: if their attitudes are not favorable enough, the tasks/activities are not intrinsically or extrinsically motivating, nothing happens" (Nikolov, personal communication, October 8, 2011).

Repetition is one of the characteristics of *motherese* or *caretaker speech* and is vital in language learning. However, learners in an EFL environment are underexposed to the target language and deprived of the constant repetition which establishes learning. Although important, unfortunately repetition can easily deteriorate into decontextualized and unmotivating drilling. Graham (2006) maintains that a major advantage of music is that it offers a lot of repetition without the drudgery of drilling.

Phonemic awareness, the realization that words can be broken up into individual sounds or phonemes, is the key for all young language learners' literacy development. The most powerful predictor of reading success in children is their level of phonemic awareness and ability to attend to and manipulate phonemes (Adams 1990; Henriksson-Macaulay 2013). Henriksson-Macaulay (2013) reports that kindergarten age children who engage in as little as 30 minutes of musical instruction a week can improve phonemic awareness significantly.

A Window into Writing Musical Materials for Young English Language Learners

There is now evidence that language and music share neural resources (Patel 2003). Koelsch (2011) confirms that there is an intimate connection between music and speech and that "the human brain, particularly at an early age, does not treat language and music as strictly separate domains" (184).

Lessons Learned from the Classroom

Years spent teaching and observing young EFL learners in Japan have provided many examples of how rhythm and music support what the literature tells us about how children learn. I can thank rhythm and music for the successful teaching of large groups of Grade 5 and 6 elementary students in Japan and maintaining order and motivation in the classroom. When presenting communicative chunks of language, I chanted the language as slow, exaggerated, sentences revealing the rhythmical nature of English and showing how stress falls on the important words to convey meaning. "Once an individual puts emphasis in his/her utterances the speech becomes more song-like" (Koelsch 2011, 183). I chanted questions like, "What colour do you like?" and the class responded with "I like yellow", for example. We then had one half of the class chant the question and the other half chant the answer. This simple practice was effective in making meaning, learning vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, anchoring the character English as well as maintaining motivation and avoiding boredom. Happily, I found that language taught through chanting, transfers the characteristic rhythm and stress naturally to spoken language.

An important classroom moment was witnessing how melody prompted a small class of 6-year-olds to remember a word. As a review exercise, I held up a flashcard and asked the students to tell me the word for "rainbow". As they struggled to remember, I chanced to hum the Rainbow Song (originally used to teach the word) stopping right where the word *rainbow* occurred in the melody. As if by magic they instantly called out "rainbow" (Thain 2010). Fonseca-Mora (2000) recognizes that singing helps memory as music leaves very deep traces in our memories and that "melody seems to act as a path or cue to evoke the precise information we are trying to retrieve" (150). As a singer, it was easy to see how melody cues recall. When I sang professionally, my repertoire was in the order of 300 songs. Now, after many years, I can still remember those songs and could probably write out most of the lyrics. I could never, however, write down 300 recipes from memory. Sacks (2007) recognizes our limited ability to hold a lot of information in our minds "unless we use mnemonic devices or patterns – the most powerful of these devices are rhyme, meter and song" (237). This is easy to test: just ask an English speaker what the eighth letter of the alphabet is and most will begin singing the alphabet song and counting on their fingers.

My teaching journal provides clear evidence that what is learned through music is easier to remember than spoken language. When rehearsing a class of 6- and 7-year-olds for a school concert in English, half the students were singing songs and the other half were performing a small play. The songs were learned quickly and joyfully. Even with a lot of attention to understanding the meaning, the spoken language from the play required tedious repetition and extensive rehearsal and no joy was to be found in the faces of the young actors.

A group of 4-year-olds from a Buddhist kindergarten in Japan taught me a lot about song- writing. I was interested in knowing how children might react to a brand new English song without any introduction or explanation. I played a new, original song about making a birthday cake. Within seconds the whole group was moving as one, in time with the music and starting to sing the refrains on the first listening. The next week I played the song spontaneously. The children naturally started moving with the rhythm, instantly sang the parts of the song that were repeated in the chorus, mumbled over the words from the verses that were not repeated and remembered and sang the words when the repetition in the chorus started again.

A Window into Writing Musical Materials for Young English Language Learners

What to Keep in Mind When Writing Educational Songs for Children

When planning a lesson, teachers have a teaching point in mind and ways of assessing whether the students have, in fact, learned what was intended. However, sometimes poor planning or careless teaching results in children learning things we don't mean to teach. Parents often learn this the hard way when they hear their young children repeating private family conversations to others. Writing effective educational songs for children requires great care, an awareness of how children learn, consideration of the age and developmental stage of the young learners plus solid song-writing skills so that children learn what is intended.

Song-writers need to be clear on the purpose of each song they write. Is it a song to practice pronunciation, to introduce important chunks of language, to teach vocabulary, support reading, introduce cultural phenomena that only exist in the folklore of the target language or to provide accompaniment for actions? Songs designed to practice intricate vocabulary must be slow to give students an opportunity to keep up. Conversely, an action song would have a great rhythm, lots of energy and a bright tempo. Action songs tend to be lyrically sparse with lots of repetition as speed makes it difficult for young learners to catch and sing the words and perform the actions. Teachers of young learners have seen what happens when they speed up action songs for fun. Inevitably the children get over-excited and lose control. Fun is important, but if teaching something concrete is the goal, then winding the students up until they overheat is not advised.

Listeners generally remember the chorus section of a pop song and with good reason. The chorus is the part of the song that repeats. So while we hear each verse of a song once in every listening we hear the chorus many times. In writing for children we take advantage of repetition by putting the most important words in the song in the chorus as children learn the part that is repeated most often.

Teaching materials for young learners must be age appropriate and meaningful. Children are masters at remembering and repeating, however in English classes where drilling occurs children sometimes *parrot* their responses, meaning that they are producing the language without understanding the meaning. If children memorize a song without knowing the meaning they will have gained nothing to apply to communicative situations. Action songs and songs where children have the opportunity to demonstrate understanding through their actions are helpful in learning a new language as meaning can be established first and used to scaffold language learning.

When writing songs for young EFL learners the words must be chosen very carefully. In contract song-writing publishers normally provide words through vocabulary lists or stories. When writing from a set of words I use word association to suggest a story line. Key words are then built into a repeating chorus. In writing musical materials for multi-level courses, writers must keep previously-learned-vocabulary and grammar concepts in mind as children learn by building on existing knowledge.

Most children's songs are written in 4/4 time, a simple 4-beat structure, that reflects the natural rhythm of English. Complicated rhythms do not lend themselves to teaching English stress and character and children often do not have the physical coordination to deal with complicated rhythms.

Singing is a physical skill that combines fine motor control of vocal cords with larger abdominal muscles that support breathing. Small children have small vocal cords so cannot sing low notes. Without proper support from breath, long notes are hard for children to sustain. Melodic steps are also easier for young singers to manage. Large jumps in the melody are problematic and are more suitable for older, more experienced singers.

The pitch of the song, how high and how low the notes of the melody go, is important when writing for children. Although some children can sing very high notes, most children are comfortable singing in the range of *middle C* to *high C*, a one octave range. Ideally, songs written for young learners should be written in a key that is easy for the teacher to sing as well. While teaching in Japan I was often frustrated

by not being able to sing along with my young students because the materials provided by the school were simply too high for me to sing.

Another very real lesson learned from the classroom is that when students reach the age of 11 or 12, most simply stop singing in class. There is a great emotional shift that takes place at this age to do with developmental changes and peer/social pressure and somehow this causes singing in class to come to an abrupt halt. In some cases, chanting, keeping the rhythm but taking the melody out of the song, will work with these adolescent learners. Chanting is speaking in time, similar to rap music and there is no melody to sing. Students in this age group will chant and possibly sing a little if the materials are appealing and the production sounds very modern. Since melody makes lyrics easier to remember, it does work better to have a predictable, sung melodic chorus that is repeated and then lyrically fresh verses that are spoken/chanted. With this in mind, my co-writer and I have developed a chant/song hybrid that we call a *chong*. Even if students will not actually perform the chongs, they will listen and perhaps sing along silently in their heads which has value. Chongs are effective for teaching functional chunks of language, practicing pronunciation and demonstrating the natural rhythm and stress of conversational English. Please see below for details of my website to access examples of chants and chongs.

Choosing Musical Materials for the EFL Classroom

Most of us have favorite songs and like songs for different reasons. Why do adults and children want to hear their favorite songs over and over again? Canadian researchers Salimpoor et al. (2011) discovered that dopamine, a pleasure chemical, is released when listening to music. Anticipating the excitement or satisfaction of a favorite refrain, hook or crescendo in a song stimulates dopamine, the feel-good chemical. This research helps us understand why children ask to hear their favorite songs over and over again.

When searching for effective musical materials for the classroom, I encourage teachers to consider the same factors that I consider when I write the songs. Be aware that not all songs are classroom hits, just like not all songs for adults are hits. Music professionals find it nearly impossible to define a hit or predict which songs will become hits, yet listeners somehow know when they are listening to one.

Let me leave you with a secret tool for choosing musical materials for your young learner classroom: *the over-night-catchiness-test.* A senior editor from an ELT publisher introduced me to this "catchiness test". When writing songs for the publisher, new songs submitted for approval were subjected to the over-night-catchiness-test. The editor would listen to the song once and then again on the next day. If, on that second listening, she could remember the essence of the song and do a reasonable job of singing it just from reading the lyrics, the song was accepted.

Children subconsciously test every song we play for them and it is easy to tell which ones pass their little catchiness tests. Notice if the children start to move spontaneously to the rhythm, if they are alert, interested, paying attention, starting to sing the refrains, and most importantly, if they ask for the song again. It doesn't matter how great or valuable you think a song is for the classroom, children ultimately choose the classroom hits.

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