Part IV: Music for Speaking

Though no language teacher would argue that speech and song should be presented as phonologically or prosodically identical, the parallels are undeniable. In fact, speech and music are so similar that the scientific community has debated whether music evolved from speech, or speech from music, and even if music, like language, is an evolutionary adaptation (Levitin, 2007; Patel, 2008).

These similarities between speech and song provide the creative teacher with a fertile source of classroom material. The rhythms of music, from a traditional folk song in Marsha J. Chan’s activity, to everything from nursery rhymes to R.E.M in Ildiko Porter-Szucs’s activity, to the beats of rap in Tom Lackaff’s, can provide a platform for speaking practice. Mike de Jong, who shares an original composition, and Marie Webb focus on song lyrics to explore rhyme and vowel sounds respectively, and Benjamin J. White brings together multiple characteristics of spoken English to show students that they can speak faster than they ever thought possible.

The richest use of music in a spoken language classroom, however, may not depend on any scientifically explored relationship. It is simply music as the basis for discussion. What student has never thoroughly enjoyed a conversation about music, and what teacher has never discovered students sharing music with each other before class? Social issues as presented in popular songs are discussed in activities by James Broadbridge and Lauren Lesce, while activities by Nathan Galster and Peter McDonald use songs as a basis for discussion of more personal topics, such as past experiences and likes and dislikes. Students discuss movie theme songs in Islam M. Farag’s activity, character in Matthew Kobialka’s activity, and musical instruments in Christopher Stillwell’s. Students simulate the complex task of putting together a music festival in Simon Thomas’s and Sean H. Toland’s activity, and in Meaghan Harding’s activity, students create a karaoke presentation through which they can review for their classmates anything from grammar and figurative language to reductions, linking, and assimilation.

Regardless of which came first, their similarities or differences, or their classification as an evolutionary adaptation, music and spoken language go together in comfortably complimentary harmony in a language classroom.

REFERENCES


Singing to Develop Rhythm and Linking

Marsha J. Chan

Levels All

Aims Focus on rhythm, linking, and emotional expression

Class Time 30–50 minutes

Preparation Time 15–20 minutes

Resources Recording of a song with a regular rhythm, repeated occurrences of linking, and a story to tell (see Appendix A)

This step-by-step procedure provides the scaffolding that can help learners understand a song from various perspectives, with the focus of listening and singing moving from one element to another. Eventually, learners will be able to incorporate rhyme, rhythm, linking, and expression as they sing the song with expression.

PROCEDURE

1. Preteach key vocabulary or grammar points.
2. Play or sing the song; students listen one or more times.
3. Discuss the meaning of the song lyrics. Elicit from students as much as possible; fill in with explanations of literal meaning, vocabulary, grammar, and cultural viewpoints.
4. If the lyrics have rhyming words, have students identify them.
5. Play or sing the song again; ask students to listen for strong beats (stressed syllables). Have them do one of the following:
   • Clap their hands together on the strong beats.
   • While holding up one hand, open the hand with fingers extended on the strong beats, and close the hand into a fist on the weaker beats.
   • Tap their fingers on their desks on the strong beats.
6. Have students sing the song, focusing on rhythm and rhyme, making stressed syllables clearer and louder than the others.
7. Listen for difficulties students are having, for example mispronouncing bonnie as boney, and model the correct pronunciation.
8. Play or sing the song again; ask students to listen for linking between words. At each instance they hear, have them raise their hands quickly and bring them down. Have students sing the song, paying attention to linking.
9. Ask students to consider the mood of each verse, prompting with questions, as needed: Is the singer happy? Sad? Grieving? Worried? Excited? How can you indicate the feeling with your tone, facial expression, gestures?

10. Have students sing the song, keeping the rhythm and linking, and incorporating the emotional expression into the lyrics.

CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

1. If you are a musician, perform the song live.

2. Listen to the song that you plan to use and write down the lyrics, or find the lyrics online and check them with the selected version of the song. Include the names of the lyricist and song writer, if available.
Desert Island Songs

Peter McDonald

Levels

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<th>All</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aims</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give personal information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express opinions, feelings, and emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talk about likes and dislikes</td>
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<td>Converse about past experiences</td>
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<td>Discuss personal relationships</td>
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Class Time

≈ 1 hour

Preparation Time

1 hour

Resources

Audio recording of songs or access to YouTube

Songs support fluency because music provides a stimulus that can unlock memories, feelings, emotions, and so on that may not appear under normal classroom settings. This activity is based on the popular British radio program Desert Island Discs, in which prominent people (movie stars, musicians, business people, etc.) talk about the songs they would choose if they were cast away on a desert island. Through context and structure, this activity gives students a clear communicative function.

PROCEDURE

1. Select four songs that you would take to a deserted island. Prepare an explanation for each song using the following questions as guidelines.
   • Why did you choose this particular song to be included in your castaway disc?
   • What does the song mean to you?
   • Which stage in your life (early childhood, teenage years, etc.) does the song represent?
   • Which memories of people, places, and other things does the song evoke in you?

2. Play/sing the songs or part of the songs to the students and explain why you selected them. Encourage the students to ask questions to initiate a discussion about music and what music means in your life.

3. Have the students create their own desert island song list based on your model.

4. Ask the students to share their songs and experiences with their classmates.
CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

1. It is important to inform the students that any song that represents things that are meaningful to them is acceptable. The song does not have to be one that they like or that is critically important.

2. You can easily adapt this activity to different levels; you can provide elementary classes with teacher-centered models and advanced classes with more autonomy.

3. The activity also provides a good foundation for follow-up activities. For example, students can make their own listening comprehension tasks based on the songs and explanations of why they selected the songs, and use these to test their classmates. Students may also search for a famous person on the BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qnmr) and discuss what they have found in class.