

Songs and all that Jazz

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Key Words: Songs as ELT materials, learning language through songs, grammar teaching

Abstract

This report on using songs for grammar instruction is a small part of my ongoing doctoral dissertation on teacher beliefs on language learning and teaching. The study was conducted on four urban English high school teachers in Bangalore. The teachers used songs as an authentic resource to teach grammar. The teachers reported that songs provided an ideal context for language learning because the students learned language structures without explicit instruction, while also being able to use them in contexts outside the classroom. This paper describes in detail the procedure I used to teach phrasal verbs.

Introduction

While attending a language conference in Malaysia, a certain plenary drew much attention, and several conference attendees queued up in front of the main hall to find a seat to listen to Carolyn Graham, the creator of Jazz Chants. Graham had come up with interesting ways to connect the rhythm of spoken American English to the beat of jazz. At the conference, Graham began her plenary with a song.

Fresh fish

Fresh fish for breakfast

Fresh fish for lunch

Fresh fish for dinner

Come on come on come on

Munch, munch, munch

Fresh fish

Who'll catch it?

She will

Who'll cook it?

He will

Who'll eat it?

We will!

Fresh Fish . . .

She had over two hundred adults clapping and singing voluntarily and enthusiastically to her chants. She introduced some more songs and interspersed her singing with tiny doses of instruction on how the repetition of lines in songs could be used to teach language structures. She also stated that songs were an interesting medium to introduce conversations about diversity and gender. In reversing the role of who would catch the fish and who would cook it, Graham pointed to a potential opportunity for discussions on gender since in certain cultures, men do not cook.

Songs provide repetition and identifiable language patterns. In addition, they also help to improve pronunciation and rhythm, develop listening skills and create an atmosphere of fun, all of which are integral to learning. In using songs, several aspects of a language can be delivered and reinforced. They include primary materials sometimes, and at other times, teachers use them as gap fillers and for warm-ups. Lastly, songs never get "old".

I was already familiar with Subrahmanian's (2001) use of songs to teach grammar as part of the teacher education programs at the Central Institute of English, Hyderabad, but after seeing Graham's performance, it became somewhat urgent to try using songs in an Indian school context.

Relevance of Songs

Learners readily accept language instruction when songs become an integral part of second or foreign language learning. They motivate learners to learn a language (Israel, 2013). Good, Russo & Sullivan (2015) compared vocabulary development among students taught through songs and speech-based methods. They report that the students taught through songs showed more improvement in English vocabulary and pronunciation compared to the comparison group. Kara and Aksel (2013) report that teaching grammar through songs is more effective compared to the traditional method of grammar teaching. Subrahmanian (2001) finds that children learn the meaning and use of phrasal verbs effectively when songs are used. Several studies have shown that music enhances content knowledge as well. Songs have been used to teach science (Governor, Hall & Jackson, 2013); mathematics (Geist & Geist, 2008); and language especially phonemic awareness (Dyer, 2011). Integrating songs into teaching enhances cohesiveness and has

a positive effect on classroom behaviours (DiDomenico, 2017).

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis is the most referred to theoretical perspective when using songs in language teaching and learning. Essentially, Krashen's theory maintains that affective variables such as boredom, fear, nervousness and resistance to change possibly hinder the acquisition of a second language by preventing the input from reaching the Language Acquisition Device that is integral to acquisition. Songs reduce the affective filter by providing an atmosphere that is relaxed and anxiety-free, which then draws the learners' interest and builds motivation. When learners learn a language where the acquisition is induced by self-motivation, they develop an intrinsic love for language learning.

In first language acquisition, children in their natural setting, receive considerable meaningful input. In a second language, successful acquisition depends on the coming together of several factors, since language learners attempt to map form and function to produce meaningful utterances based on their language experiences (Ellis, 2002; Lieven & Tomasello, 2008). Therefore, in ESL classrooms, if teachers could provide a natural, anxiety-free environment through interesting activities, learning a second language could be accomplished with greater ease.

Details of the Study

The current research was a minor part of larger doctoral research encompassing teacher beliefs on language learning. The study was carried out in an urban school where the medium of instruction was English. The participants included four high school teachers who taught classes seven, eight and nine. The proficiency level of teachers, assessed using The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) ranged between B1 and B2 levels.

In this study, songs were used as supplementary materials to teach phrasal verbs. Teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their learners' lack of motivation in learning grammatical structures. They added that despite repeated instruction, learners translated from their mother tongue into English, which resulted in repeated grammatical errors. Moreover, the teachers used a PPP method (present, practice, and produce) of grammar instruction, which added to the fatigue in grammar learning. I trained them to use songs to teach phrasal verbs to address this problem.

I used non-participant observation to get an insider perspective of everyday interactions, instructional styles of the teachers, and teacher and learner proficiency levels. The insider perspective allowed me to design training that was easy for the teachers to implement. As part of the training, teachers received two hours of instruction on phrasal verbs. They were asked to identify phrasal verbs in one or two lessons in their prescribed textbook.

Procedure for Teaching Phrasal Verbs

1. Before the teachers were given formal instructions on phrasal verbs, they were asked for some of their favourite songs. The list of songs was then put to vote to select one song. The song that received the most votes was used for instruction. For this training module, Phil Collins' "Another Day in Paradise" (<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/philcollins/anotherdayinparadise.html>) was used.
2. The teachers were supplied with the printed lyrics in which certain places were left blank.
3. I played the song three times using my mobile phone. The first time, I asked the teachers to just listen to the song. The second time, the teachers had to listen and fill in the empty blanks. The

third time they had to correct mistakes and fill any remaining gaps.

4. Once everyone had filled in all the blanks, the answers were read aloud. I followed this up by checking to see if anyone had any incorrect answers. I made a note of the incorrect answers.
5. I then asked the teachers what the phrasal verbs meant in the context of the song.

Besides eliciting explanations of the meanings of the phrasal verbs, I asked the teachers to share different interpretations of the song—these moments of interaction created a balance between teacher and student talk time. This activity was then followed up with explicit instruction on phrasal verbs.

The teachers repeated the same steps with their students.

Observations

While the teachers did not explicitly teach the target language structure, they helped learners build an understanding of the target language structure from the context. This allowed the learners to learn and discover the language independently, resulting in a sense of success. By eliciting first-hand experiences about the song, the teachers helped their learners connect previously learnt words and language structures to the ones that the learners would learn through the song.

Through the questioning cycle (Paul, 1996, p. 7), the teacher systematically helped the learners to recognize the new language forms. This motivated the learners to learn further by applying their

knowledge to other songs. Learners unravelled patterns and structures by consciously and cognitively paying "deep" attention (Schmidt, 1990, 2001) to the form and meaning of certain language items in their inputs, thereby contributing towards internalization and learning.

Once the learners could identify phrasal verbs in other songs and the teachers were confident that their learners could recognize them, the concept was explicitly taught. After the lecture, the teachers encouraged the students to identify phrasal verbs in the short stories included in the prescribed textbooks. All students could identify phrasal verbs in the story, thereby reinforcing the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990).

The teachers found this approach of teaching grammar rewarding from a learning and pedagogical perspectives. Therefore, they decided to experiment with using songs in other areas of language instruction as well, such as vocabulary teaching.

Conclusion

By using songs that the students chose themselves, the teacher ensured that authentic learning material was used, which in turn allowed for language instruction to be effective. Ensuring the involvement of the learners is the key to promoting deep learning and producing much of the language content outside the classroom. If the students feel that learning is teacher-initiated and that the songs are being used to "teach", they may lose interest. Therefore, having "fun" must be integrated with language learning.

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