Knowing Culture Through Music

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We describe two approaches used in two separate English language courses for using music to promote language acquisition, cultural understanding, and music appreciation. In the first approach, students interact with popular songs and stories that relate to these songs, and they interact with these stories and songs in novel and communicative ways using, for example, "media gap" activities and "story pods." In the second approach, students interact with songs and learn song structure so that they can create, compose, and perform their own songs. Neither the students who compose and perform nor the teachers who facilitate the composing and performing need to be trained musicians. Questionnaire data gathered separately at the end of both courses show that both approaches may increase appreciation for language, culture, and music, but the performance approach may increase appreciation for music significantly more.

二つの別の英語の授業で、音楽を活用して語学習得度・文化理解力・音楽鑑賞力を促進する2つのアプローチを紹介する。最初のアプローチでは、受講者に有名な歌を聞かせ、その歌にまつわる話をする。そして「メディアギャップ」アクティビティや「ストーリーポッド」を用いた新しい方法で、歌と物語に触れさせる。2つ目のアプローチでは、受講者に歌を聞かせ、その構成を学ばせる。そうすることで、受講者自身が作詞・作曲し、自らの曲を演奏できるようになる。作曲・演奏する受講者とそれをサポートする講師のいずれも、音楽に関する特別な専門知識を持っている必要はない。それぞれ二つの授業の最後に行ったアンケート調査の結果を分析すると、これら2つのアプローチは語学・文化・音楽に対する理解を深めるために有用であるが、音楽の鑑賞能力という点では、演奏を用いる後者のアプローチが大きく貢献していることがわかる。

People often say that music is the universal language. This is true in the sense that music is a cultural universal (Brown, 1991), and probably most people in almost all cultures find real pleasure in music. However, it is also false, for just as an English speaker may not understand a Chinese speaker, a person who understands and enjoys classical music may not understand and enjoy jazz music. Cross-culturally speaking, there are many languages, and there are many genres of music. If students love and understand the musical languages of J-Pop or K-Pop, they may not necessarily enjoy and understand western forms of popular music, even though the genres may share roots and influences. These musical and cultural differences present numerous opportunities for language education. Teachers can tap into student interest in the cultural universal of music, and they can use songs to promote language learning and cross-cultural understanding.

Academic research supports the use of music for language learning and learning in general. For example, Murphey (1990) showed how popular songs use simple, communicative, and

conversational language that is linguistically beneficial and personally interesting to students. Songs also work with a wide variety of goals and fit with many different methodologies. Trinick (2012) reminded us that because schools often demand results evidenced through achievement testing, curriculums can become narrow and dry. However, music and song can add breadth and richness to learning processes and help reduce student anxiety. Wiseman (2013) summarized psychological research that shows a strong correlation between singing, happiness, and increased cooperation, which, as we will show, provides positive support for the novel activities that we promote.

Regarding learning culture, neuroscientist Daniel Levitin (2008) argued that if we want to understand human nature and the interaction between the brain, culture, evolution, and society, we need to look at the role of music in human life. In evolutionary terms, Levitin spoke of the memorable survival information in songs that give human offspring a survival advantage. In modern society, we can see this survival advantage in the roots and history of blues music. Moore (2002) even went so far as to say that African Americans found blues and gospel to be indispensable for their cultural survival. For our purposes, music gives us a window into culture through which we see how people survive, adapt, and live. Murphey (1992) claimed that pop songs have a "riskless" (p. 771) nature that can help to lower the affective filters of learners. Moreover, the conversational and emotional aspects of lyrics can help learners make personal associations with songs from other cultures. This implies that songs may help learners become more open to learning about culture and that teachers can help them to do so in a thoughtful and critical way. According to Engh (2013), using music for language and culture learning has strong theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical support. Of course, it is not a new idea. However, in this paper we present a number of novel ways in which teachers can use music and song in language classes. Our classes consisted of undergraduate students at Japanese universities, but the approaches are transferable to other learning situations.

In Part 1, we show how to use stories and songs as a springboard into effective and innovative communicative activities. In Part 2, we move from more typical music-based activities into group projects where students collaborate in the creation, production, and performance of their own songs. We also emphasize that teachers and students can do these performance projects without having musical training or talent. All that is required is an appreciation for music and a belief in human creativity. In Part 3, we summarize the results of an end-of-term questionnaire given to our students. Reflecting on each class, students stated that they grew in their appreciation of music, culture, and language. But the most interesting result was that students who created and performed music seemed to grow to appreciate music more than those who did not create and perform music.

Part 1A: Story and Song—Activities With Stories

In the classes that focused on story and song, the teacher followed a format. Each week students read a story about a particular artist or a particular theme in the selected song. These song-related stories, averaging 300-600 words in length, fit into an outside extensive reading program, in which students read stories and graded readers for pleasure and at an appropriate level. Students read the books and stories, tracking word counts and reading speed on the extensive reading website BeeOasis.com. They also chose which books or stories they would read outside of class.

For in-class activities, the teacher chose graded stories in which students generally knew about 95% of the words. Moreover, though the stories were nonfiction, they often exhibited the elements of story grammar (Haven, 2007). That is, they had a

main character who was in a predicament and who tried to extricate him- or herself from this predicament (Gottschall, 2012). The teacher used the stories in a number of novel ways.

Media Gap Activities

One example is the media gap activity (Poulshock & Menish, 2011). In this activity, the teacher presents one paragraph of a story on a screen. Students sit in pairs as speaker and listener. The speaker faces the screen; the listener faces the speaker. The listener cannot see the screen. The speaker speaks part of the story from the screen, and the listener shadows the speaker. To facilitate the activity, the teacher periodically summarizes its benefits using the acronym *REALISM*.

R Pairs set a good *Rhythm* while speaking with each other.

E They need to practice clear *Elocution* to be understood and shadowed.

A They say the appropriate *Amount* of text, so the listener can shadow easily.

L The activity promotes *Listening*.

I Students also can learn *Idioms* and words.

S When students use *Signals* or gestures . . .

M This helps them get their *Message* across.

Above all, the message aspect of this activity makes it communicative. As the listener cannot see the text, she is hearing and shadowing a real message that the speaker communicates; by shadowing, she shows comprehension of that message. After the pairs complete the first paragraph, the next slide is for Q&A with two to three comprehension questions. The speaker asks the questions, and the listener answers. If the listener has trouble, hints are often provided on the screen, and the speaker gives the hints to the listener to help her answer the questions. After completing one story slide and one Q&A slide, the speakers and listeners switch places, and they repeat the process with the next paragraph of the story. Pairs can switch places only once for a short activity, or they can switch places 2 to 4 times. Switching twice seems to be an optimal amount for this activity.

The media gap activity is based on a story that the students have access to in three different forms. They have access to an online version and in the media gap activity in the form of slides. But they also have a printed copy, which is a cloze activity with around 15 blanks and four to five questions that are different from the questions on the Q&A slide of the media gap activity. The three different forms of media allow the teacher to vary the ways students interact with stories. This is helpful because although students do a new story each week, they can become bored when doing the same kind of activity repeatedly.

Additional Activities, Including Story Pods

Here is a full list of the ways that students interact with stories that are related to songs.

1. Media gap activity (as described).
2. Read stories online and track the word count.
3. Read the stories online and track reading speed.
4. Read stories online and track both reading speed and word count.
5. Listen to a story in class, filling in the blanks of a printed cloze activity.
6. After doing part of a story as a media gap activity, students do the rest while listening to the recording and while filling in blanks of a cloze activity.

7. Looking at the media gap activity slides, the speaker reads the story from the screen. With her back to the screen, the listener fills in the blanks on the printed copy while listening to the speaker.
8. Repeated reading for fluency (Nation, 2013). Students use printed stories without blanks or stories with blanks that they have filled in. In pairs, one student is the reader; the other is the listener. The teacher sets a timer for 1 minute. The reader reads the text out loud for 1 minute and marks the place where he stopped reading. The teacher sets the timer again, and the reader reads the same text for 1 minute and marks the second place where he stopped reading. Readers usually read more the second time and thus show an immediate gain in oral reading fluency. After this, readers and listeners switch roles, repeating the process with a new section of text.
9. Peer presentations. For homework, students choose from a number of stories related to the song for the given week. In class, they pair up and share two to three highlights from the story that they read. Peers can evaluate presentations using a simple form that provides feedback to the speakers.
10. Story Pod. This activity works best with short, short stories with a strong story grammar. The teacher prepares four kinds of slides: (a) a dark blank slide; (b) a paragraph of the story; (c) a set of pop-up grammar and lexical items from that paragraph; and (d) a Q&A slide for discussion. First, the students get in small groups of two to four. Then the teacher shows the dark, blank slide and tells the first part of the story with some improvisation but without showing any text. Next the teacher shows the first paragraph of the story to the class and reads it out loud. Then the teacher shows a slide, which highlights idioms, new words, and particular grammatical items. This pop-up grammar–lexis slide is minimalistic, highlighting only a few key features so as not to take away from the focus on *story*. Finally, the teacher shows the Q&A slide, which includes comprehension and discussion questions. After a brief Q&A, the teacher moves to the next part of the story with the next set of four slides. The story must have a strong story grammar element, and if there is a dramatic cut-off point, the teacher can leave the students hanging and give them homework to read the rest of the story online.

Though a number of these activities are traditional and commonly used, the media gap activity and the story pod activity are less common, and students respond to them positively. Video logs of these activities reveal a dynamic classroom, with virtually all students fully engaged while interacting with each other in an active, lively, and responsive way. When students correctly answer questions on the Q&A slides, they often smile, while congratulating or high-fiving each other.

Part 1B: Story and Song—Activities With Songs

Stories tie into the songs used in class, either by presenting biographies about the artists or by presenting a theme from the song. Following are examples of activities from one song, "Corrina, Corrina," by Bob Dylan, which was presented along with a story about Bob Dylan, entitled "The Adventures of a Folk Singer." "Corrina, Corrina" works in the language class because it is simple and thus builds confidence for students who are not used to listening to songs in English. Nevertheless, the song touches on universal themes that are good for any level of discussion.

After reading a brief introduction to the song, students in groups are instructed, "Before listening, ask your Virtual Assistant (Siri), 'What is the meaning of life?'" This question requires an iPhone, and often at least one student per group has

the device. After figuring out how to do it, groups will get many different answers to the question. For example, "The answer is chocolate" or "It's nothing Nietzsche couldn't teach ya." If no one has an iPhone, students can answer the question themselves. After each group has some answers, they report them to the whole class. The teacher may write the answers on the board so that the whole class sees the different answers clearly. After this warm-up, students are instructed, "While listening, highlight new words and phrases." Then they listen to the song. The song is easy, so they will find only a few words that are new, like *gal*, *ain't*, and *whistle*.

After covering the vocabulary, students are instructed, "After listening, translate this phrase from the song, 'I ain't got Corrina. Life don't mean a thing.'" The translation exercise allows students to play around with a key phrase in the song, and they often come up with unique and poignant translations.

Then the students answer these questions: "Where is Corrina? Why is she gone?" In groups, the students imagine where Corrina has gone. Each group usually comes up with different answers, things like *she went to heaven*, *she died*, *she left him for another guy*, *she got tired of him*, and *she went to her parents house to get away from him*.

Finally, students answer the last question, "What should he do?" At this point, the teacher might add, "What should he do to find meaning in his life?" The students again think up their answers in groups. After a few minutes, the teacher asks groups to report their answers to the whole class. Students say things like *he should get a hobby*, *he should forget about her*, *he should get a job*, *he should study English*, and *he should find another woman*.

Though these activities are based on a simple song, the theme allows for both simple and complex answers. The theme-based conversation works as a principle with other songs. The key is not to focus on the whole song, but to have students respond in concrete ways to one line or central emotional theme or moment in the song. In this way, lower level students will not be frustrated by a hard text, and higher level students can still respond meaningfully to the theme. The key (and the hard part for the teacher) is to find that springboard theme in a phrase or idea in the song from which students can jump into a tangible task-based or list-making response.

If the task is too difficult or vague, groups will flounder, but if the task is tangible and meaningful, students often easily respond to it in English, even if their level is low. These tangible conversation tasks do not focus on comprehension checks of the song, which rarely happen in real life. Instead, students do imaginative problem solving of a problem that the song presents. This is a very natural thing to do because emotionally rich songs are often a response to some kind of confusion, difficulty, trouble, or conflict, and the song writer has tried to make meaning out of a difficult situation through the song.

Part 2: The Performance Project

Though the previous activities may add novelty to using music in English classes, teachers can still fall into predictable patterns, using the same type of songs with clear grammatical content, easy lyrics, and the common technique of using fill-in-the blank activities. With these kinds of activities, students can become passive, so teachers who use music in class need to create novel activities that promote active learning. In one surprisingly successful approach, students perform and record self-authored songs in English.

Our questionnaire data and personal experiences confirm that students seem to more deeply appreciate songs that they actually write and perform. They enjoy naming their bands, rehearsing their lyrics, and recording their own songs. On the second-to-last day of the term, the class can sit together and listen to each group's audio recordings. Guitars twang, drums roll,

the occasional flute and trumpet sound, and student-authored lyrics flow from the speakers.

The Performance Project can be one part of a course. Leading up to the project, every week students listen to and discuss one or two songs. At least one song serves a historical purpose and contains biographical and cultural references to a particular genre. The other relates to another aspect of the lesson such as rhyme, diction, or the role of instrumental solos. This serves the purpose of making the process of music production more comprehensible to the nonmusicians in the class. Quizzes ensure that students understand the context of each musical style, and handouts cover essential vocabulary and stylistic considerations.

Early in the semester, song structure is covered. Students need to understand song structure and follow it when they make their songs. Because students have already studied several songs, they can often refer to these handouts. The teacher also introduces vocabulary such as *verse*, *line*, *rhyme scheme*, *metaphor*, *word choice*, and *chorus*. One model presented is the four-verse, four-line song. This results in 16 lines of lyrics, which give enough space for students to express their ideas fully.

Students write the first version of their song in Japanese, with an English translation on the same page. Writing first in their native language helps them relate more deeply to the task, and it works better than having them write in English first. Content for the song varies, but students must maintain the same concept from start to finish. Over a period of 6 years in which we have used this activity, students have written 110 songs and recorded 32 of them. Songs have focused mainly on childhood memories, love interests, or dreams about the future. Many students write about concerns in their lives, such as fears and doubts about dating and job hunting.

Before the performance, groups share their lyrics with the class. They make groups of four to five, and they print copies for the whole class to see while they read their lyrics aloud. This public reading of lyrics helps students see aspects of their songs that need to be refined. In addition to structural elements, the teacher reminds students to use varied vocabulary, avoid vulgarities, and include sensory, poetic devices such as references to weather, seasons, and nature.

One important requirement is that students must meet on their own outside of class for at least two rehearsals and to record the song. In Japan, recording music is relatively easy because there are inexpensive recording studios and students can all chip in to rent a room. For a flat rate, rooms usually come equipped with a recording-capable soundboard, microphones, and instruments. Staff members can often answer simple queries. Other countries may not have these resources, or they may have alternatives.

Teachers should reassure "band members" that musical talent is not necessary for a good grade. A general survey we conduct on the 1st day of class contains questions related to musical experience. The teacher notes any positive responses regarding training in musical instruments, singing, sampling, mixing, or recording, and those experienced students form the foundations of each of the four or five groups that make up the class.

Groups are encouraged to play at any level or proficiency, but if necessary, basic singing with hand clapping and tambourine flourishes will suffice. The goal of the class is for learners in groups to express themselves musically in English. No lofty musical expectations are placed on students. As the songs take shape, students begin to express themselves with a level of openness and feeling that we don't typically see from university students in Japan. A few lines from songs written by previous students demonstrate this point.

Song One

I was captured in the iron box in the train
In the afternoon it makes us
Humans with no emotion . . .
Cutting classes in the cafeteria,
Spending time with like-minded folks
Just another thing to do
I wanted to care

Song Two

My days are filled with soccer,
So I lose half my credits
But I shift my mind to Aoyama
With worries like my job hunt.

Part 3: End-of-Course Questionnaire Data

Adding a performance element to a language class can enrich the course in many unforeseen ways. Our end-of-course questionnaire showed that, after creating and performing music, students expressed a deeper appreciation for song selections. Though this may seem too good to be true, data seem to strongly support our perceptions of the positive impact of The Performance Project. The potential reasons for this will be discussed.

Students from two separate courses completed a single questionnaire, given to the two classes separately near the end of the term. Tables 1-3 show how students responded to questions on a 5-point Likert scale. In the Story and Song Course, 63 students responded, and in the Performance Course, 24 students responded.

Students were asked to reflect back on how they had felt at the beginning of the course. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, on average, both classes rated their interest in English songs as 3.2, which seems relatively low. At the end of the course, students in the Story and Song Course rated their interest in English songs at 4.0. However, in the Performance Course, students rated their end-of-term interest in English songs at 4.5. We feel that both courses may have significantly helped to increase student interest in English songs, but the Performance Course seemed to produce a wonderful increase in student appreciation of music. Though there are many variables, we feel that the performance aspect of this course may have been the key variable for increasing music appreciation for reasons we will explain later.

Table 1. Average Growth of Interest in the Stories and Songs Course (n = 63)

Song interest		Culture interest		English interest	
Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
3.2	4.0	3.0	3.7	3.2	4.0

Note. Responses on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = *very low* to 5 = *very high*.

Students also indicated more interest in culture at the end of both courses, with an increase of 0.7 in the Stories and Songs Course, and an increase of 0.8 in the Songs and Performance Course. Regarding interest in English, students showed an increase of 0.8 in the Stories and Songs Course, and an increase of 0.6 in the Songs and Performance Course. These seem to be important increases of interest in both culture and English language, and it is possible that the use of music in class contributed to these increases.

Table 2. Average Growth of Interest in the Songs and Performance Course (n = 24)

Song interest		Culture interest		English interest	
Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
3.2	4.5	2.9	3.7	3.4	4.0

Note. Responses on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = *very low* to 5 = *very high.*

Table 3 displays how students reported they had felt at the beginning of the Songs and Performance Course about doing a performance, a rating of 2.4. After doing it, they rated their feelings about performance at 4.0, and overall they rated their song performance at 4.3. It seems clear that students came away from the Performance Course with strongly positive impressions. The actual questions were: (a) "When you heard you had to make and perform a song in class, how did you feel?" (b) "After you made and performed a song in class, how did you feel?" and (c) "If you made a song for your class, how would you rate your experience?"

Table 3. Before and After Average Feelings About Song Performance (n = 24)

Feeling about performance		(c) Performance experience in general
(a) At term start	(b) After performance	
2.4	4.0	4.3

Note. Responses on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = *very low* to 5 = *very high.*

Summary

As mentioned in the brief literature review, there is strong theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical support for using songs to teach language and culture. Though some approaches for using songs in language classes may become timeworn or banal, we have shown novel approaches for using music and song, including media gap activities, narrow theme-based discussions, and story pods. We have also shown something that we think is surprising, how nonmusical English teachers can help students create and perform songs and thus help students appreciate songs even more. Perhaps after creating and performing music, learners begin to see more clearly what actually goes into making a song, that it requires time, skill, artistry, technique, and careful crafting. At this point, our results only suggest that composing and performing help increase appreciation of music, but we think the results justify future research on this topic.

Conclusion

Self-assessment questionnaires are limited because they are subjective. We could have increased objectivity by measuring subjective "feelings" and "interests" with a before and after questionnaire, but due to time restraints, we were only able to do a single end-of-course questionnaire. However, we still think that our data bear good news for teachers who want to teach language and culture through music. We taught the two courses separately and did not collaborate on content or approach, but we got similar results with regards to increasing interest in culture, language, and music. The most notable variable seems to be performing music, which may have strongly boosted student appreciation for music. The positive news is that one does not need to be a musician to lead students through such a process. If a teacher loves music and sees it as a way to teach language and culture, then this teacher who is not a trained musician can

enhance this process even more by having students create and perform their own songs in the language classroom.

Bio Data

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