Promoting student motivation in EFL classroom: Through extended music education

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Abstract

Teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language has not been easy either for teachers or for learners. Teachers face problems while teaching it while learners face difficulties while learning it. Many factors contribute to these problems and difficulties and lack of motivation on the part of learners or demotivated learners is one of the most common problems faced by the teachers which affects both teachers and learners in negative way. Motivated learners are a dream of every EFL teachers but it is hardly realized. However, it is also important to note that teachers enjoy and lay a very significant role in EFL teaching and learning process. In this respect, the role that EFL teachers can play in motivating their learners inside and outside the EFL classrooms is to introduce or extend music education and utilize it as a strategy to motivate and promote motivation among learners. Briefing motivating learners through music attempt has also been done to systematically propose certain practical strategies for teachers to learn so that the aims and objectives of teaching English are fulfilled easily.

Keywords: motivation, EFL learners, role of teacher, music education, practical strategy

1. Introduction

The learning of English was widely criticized in the past because teachers’ methods were not based on learning a language with the outcome to achieve communicative competence. The main objective focused mainly on acquiring grammar rules and completing written tasks in order to pass an exam. The aim of this paper is to show how students
of middle school are able to learn English through songs by using all the language skills, reading, writing, listening, speaking and talking.

How many times have we heard our mothers telling us when we were kids: “If you knew the lessons as you know the songs...” There is no doubt that songs, through their rhythm and musicality, contribute to the learning and memorization of linguistic structures.

My intention is to show how songs can have important benefits in the teaching-learning of a foreign language. More particularly, my objectives are the following: to teach English in an amusing way, to transmit the desire and motivation of learning English.

2. Music and first or second language acquisition

Lowe (1995) wanted to know whether the incorporation of a music program would reinforce both the learning of music, as well as the learning of a second language. The subjects of her study were 53 second-grade students of the French Immersion program in Canada that were set up in interdisciplinary music and French classes. Students were given eight weekly units of five 15-minute music lessons that were incorporated into the regular French secondary beginner music education at the youngest possible age. His philosophy was that music’s place in the curriculum was one of a core subject. His research indicated that classes receiving daily music instruction academically surpassed classes receiving less frequent instruction. Noted improvement in other academic areas, particularly math, was an unexpected result in Kodálly’s first experiment. Daily lesson plans for both classes were prepared together by both teachers using the same educational materials and curriculum content. The results showed that the group that received the additional music lessons performed significantly better than the control group in all music tests and in the oral grammar and reading comprehension French tests, even though the principal emphasis was on musical instruction. Her findings lead to the conclusion that the study of music and foreign languages are mutually beneficial.

The purpose of Cormier’s (1985) study was to determine the extent of the relationship between selected music and French second language variables. Subjects encompassed 79 students in grades 4, 5, and 6, who were enrolled in French Immersion (including music) classes. Students were tested for six days with standardized tests for music and reading, with French tests created by the researcher. The French variables included: retention of aural information, comprehension, vocabulary, diction, pronunciation, language reading and imitation. The music variables included: tonal imagery, rhythm imagery, phrasing, music reading and pitch discrimination. Results of this study found the music variables to be significant predictors of the speech variables, implying that music and speech, both aural expressions, may involve similar learning processes. The final conclusion was that a relationship exists between French second language and music variables for grades four, five and six subjects when mental ability is taken into consideration. This is supported by the theories of Bruner (1960), Gagné (1977), and Thorndike (1913) who suggested that learning transfer occurs through similar elements, shared between subject areas.

3. Learning pronunciation through music

Most adults who learn a foreign language speak with an accent which derives in part from phonological and phonetic differences between their native language (L1) and the target foreign language (L2). Music can be effective in improving phonetic skills in a variety of ways. Leith (1979) stated, “There is probably not a better nor quicker way to teach phonetics than with songs” (p.540). Gatti-Taylor (1980) believed that phonetic instruction was one good use to which songs could be put, even in beginning classes, stating, “It is relatively easy to find song lyrics that stress a particular phoneme” (p. 466). García-Sáez (1984) agreed stating, “the use of song is an excellent way to practice Spanish phonetics and it is not at all difficult to find examples of songs that contain sounds the majority of students have trouble producing” (p. 4). The melody, combined with the lyrics, provides an excellent opportunity to review pronunciation and enjoy music at the same time.
4. Songs as pedagogical tools

One advantage of using songs in the young learner classroom is their flexibility. Songs can be used for a number of purposes and there are many reasons why songs can be considered a valuable pedagogical tool. Songs can help young learners improve their listening skills and pronunciation, therefore potentially helping them to improve their speaking skills (Murphey, 1992). Songs can also be useful tools in the learning of vocabulary, sentence structures, and sentence patterns, not to mention their reflectivity of mother tongue culture (Murphey, 1992).

Perhaps the greatest benefit to using songs in the classroom is that they can be fun. Pleasure for its own sake is an important part of learning a language, something which is often overlooked by teachers, and songs can add interest to the classroom routine and potentially improve student motivation. I personally presented to my first year pupils the alphabet through a song and they learnt it perfectly because the song was very interesting.

5. Learning culture through music

According to Jolly (1975), using songs can also give learners the opportunity to acquire a better understanding of the culture of the target language. Songs reflect culture; Shen states, “language and music are interwoven in songs to communicate cultural reality in a very unique way” (2009, p. 88). Although this is probably more applicable to songs for older learners, young learners can be given the opportunity to learn about seasonal or historical events in the target language through songs.

6. Songs and enjoyment

Probably the most obvious advantage to using songs in the young learner classroom is that they are enjoyable. Most children enjoy singing and usually respond well to using songs in the classroom, but there are more significant benefits to using songs other than just being fun. First, songs can bring variety to the everyday classroom routine. This variety stimulates interest and attention, which can help maintain classroom motivation, thereby helping learners to reach higher levels of achievement. Secondly, songs, in particular choral singing, can help to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere that makes the classroom a nonthreatening environment. By reducing anxiety, songs can help increase student interest and motivate them to learn the target language. Students often think of songs as entertainment rather than study and therefore find learning English through songs fun and enjoyable.

7. Songs and vocabulary

Songs can provide the opportunity for vocabulary practice. They are usually based around a theme or topic that can provide the context for vocabulary learning. The song Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes, for example, could be used to review body parts, or the song I Can Sing a Rainbow might be useful for reviewing color names. Most children’s songs are characterized by monosyllabic words, many of which are frequently repeated. This repetition offers greater exposure to these words and can help to improve vocabulary acquisition.

Some of the vocabulary and language used in traditional and popular English songs, however, can cause difficulties for language learners due to their use of low frequency and archaic words. The song and the lyrics need to be selected carefully to complement the target vocabulary. A difficulty for teachers is finding and selecting songs that are suitable both in terms of vocabulary and topic or theme.

8. Ideas for using songs in the English classroom

Teacher use songs in the English language classroom for a variety of reasons, the most common being:

- To present a topic, a language point, lexis.
- To practice a language points, lexis etc.
- To focus on common learner errors in a more in a more indirect way.
- To encourage extensive and intensive listening.
To stimulate discussion of attitudes and feelings.
To encourage creativity and use of imagination.
To provide a relaxed classroom atmosphere
To bring variety and fun to teaching and learning

9. Conclusion

The first purpose in presenting this paper is to state a case for developing songs from activities into language learning tasks. The second purpose is to highlight how, with a little initiative, teachers can adapt children’s songs to better suit their teaching goals. Songs work in a dynamic and entertaining way as enriching linguistic input. Moreover, basic learning competences are enhanced with the use of music in the classroom, as it can be employed with theoretical reasoning, practical skills, personal attitudes and personal engagement, so varied possibilities with music are in the class. Songs can be used as a valuable teaching and learning tool. Using songs can help learners improve their listening skills and pronunciation; they can also be useful for teaching vocabulary and sentence structures. Probably the greatest benefit to using songs in the classroom is that they are enjoyable. Using songs as tasks might be one way of helping transfer words from songs into use, and maximize the potential of songs as teaching and learning tools. Adapting existing children’s songs is one method that teachers can use to increase their repertoire of songs, thus giving them more opportunity to use songs in their teaching contexts.

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