

Sound and Sight: The Use of Song to Promote Language Learning

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Abstract

With the introduction of the New Zealand government's National Standards, there are increasing demands on teachers to provide evidence of student achievement in the areas of numeracy and literacy. As a result, primary school teachers may perceive that there is neither time nor the need for music activities such as singing, which may be viewed purely as entertainment. This perspective may prevent teachers from realizing the potential of song as a valuable tool for literacy learning, particularly during a child's first 4 years of school. This article explores whether purposeful application of song can add a new dimension to existing language programs, offering a meaningful and engaging context for learning. Through an analysis of a range of literature, key elements and principles relating to the affective, sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic benefits and issues of song for language learning are identified and discussed. Potential ideas for establishing a singing environment are suggested.

Keywords

singing, language development, culture, affective, sociocultural, cognitive, early childhood

Introduction

Imagine life without song. When people gather for any significant event, it is highly likely to involve singing. For children, singing is a form of personal and cultural expression, evoking emotional responses, telling stories, and creating a sense of belonging and well-being (Ministry of Education, 2001).

While all music experiences are of value, singing plays a special role in helping construct a multilayered culture in a primary school setting. At the macro level, schools and communities intermingle to produce major events such as choir festivals and cultural festivals. At the meso level, the whole school or syndicates may come together on a regular basis to sing assembly songs or to put on school productions, and at the micro level, a classroom culture may be established through music, for example, beginning and ending each school day with a song. At all levels, the singing repertoire selected should reflect the cultural capital (Kingston, 2001) of the children in the group, recognizing and celebrating cultural diversity and giving insight into a range of cultures through song (Macias, 2008).

In New Zealand primary schools, assembly singing is commonplace, and it is an integral and historical part of schools' rituals. Many schools have adopted the Māori practice of singing a *waiata* (Māori song) to welcome guests or to follow a speech. Classroom singing, however,

appears to be somewhat random and depends on a range of factors such as teachers' commitment, expertise, and beliefs.

Innovation or Awareness

The use of song as an integral part of a primary school day or week is neither new nor innovative. The inclusion of traditional rhymes and chants, particularly in early childhood and junior school settings, may be considered by some to be common practice. Recent research with culturally diverse communities in Auckland suggests that reading lyrics online is a popular activity for older students (S. McNaughton, 16 December 2010, personal communication).

Bartel (2004) suggests that the notion of *innovation*, in itself, implies that there is an existing set of norms and assumptions from which to deviate in order to create new approaches and perspectives, and he challenges music educators to consider music education in different ways in today's educational climate.

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Deliberate and purposeful use of song lyrics as shared reading text is, perhaps, more awareness than innovation. As Lee (2009) says, “Music is all around us but is not used as much as it should be in the language classroom” (p. 29).

Learning Through Music

It could be argued that music in collaboration with other learning areas compromises music in its own right (Bartel, 2004; Cane, 2009; Eisner, 2001). For example, Cane (2009) asserts, “The arts are not to be treated as projects that demonstrate learning in other disciplines, but are rather ‘another way to learn’” (p. 34). This line of argument is further developed by Bartel (2004) who states, “Without its expressive function and aesthetic quality music has nothing to offer to the education of children” (p. vii).

Other writers such as Balkin (1999), Lee (2009), and Lowe (2002) argue that there is, indeed, value in using music to enrich existing literacy programs, learning *through* music, outside the formal music education context. Patel (2008) states, “The central role of music and language in human existence and the fact that both involve complex and meaningful sound sequences naturally invite comparison between the two domains” (p. 3). Considering the current political arena in which music, alongside the other arts, finds itself, it is timely to explore potential connections between music and nonmusical learning. It is the latter that offers the generalist primary teacher opportunities to support and enrich existing literacy programs, using music as a means of enhancing existing language experiences.

Both music for music’s sake, and music as a springboard for other learning fulfill different functions within the broader sphere of music education and are neither opposing nor complementary—just different means to different ends. Few would dispute the need for specialist music educators with knowledge and expertise and a deep-rooted philosophy of music education to run in-depth music programs (Balkin, 1999). However, the presence of a music specialist in a primary school should not be considered justification for the generalist teacher to do away with music in the classroom. Both music and speech therapists have, for at least half a century, recognized the valuable contribution that music makes to children’s learning and language development (Bolton, 2008), and classroom teachers should take advantage of every opportunity to maximize learning possibilities. It is the philosophical intent that matters.

Domains of Mutual Benefit

Regular use of music experiences such as singing in the classroom has benefits for both language development as well as music development (Moore, 2009) and should be viewed as a partnership that may enrich the learning

process, with a purposeful methodology for both. Paquette and Rieg (2008) suggest that “music can transform classrooms into positive learning environments where children thrive academically, socially and emotionally” (p. 227). There are several areas or domains of mutual benefit for both music and language, including affective, sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic. Although each domain offers potentially positive outcomes, they are complementary and sometimes inseparable.

The Affective Domain

Imagine a classroom in which children sing every day, establishing singing as an important social and cultural experience in each child’s life. Singing is celebratory and social, establishing meaningful connections to children’s lives and experiences, such as birthdays, welcomes, sports events, and festivals (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Music’s role, particularly the regular use of song, in reducing the effects of anxiety and fostering feelings of well-being and connectedness is a theme that clearly emerges from a study of literature in the field (Costa, 2008, pp. 27–28; Woodford, 2005; Wylie & Foster-Cohen, 2007). Familiar songs have the power to stimulate affective responses, sometimes associated with meaningful events and people; many of us will have our own stories about particular songs, perhaps associated with childhood memories. For example, a Samoan colleague describes the role of song in her childhood years as follows:

Reflecting back on my childhood memories, waking up in the morning to the singing of songbirds in the trees, crawling from a mosquito net to join family hymn singing for lotu (devotion), or listening to my parents singing in the kitchen as they prepared our lunches for school, have influenced my own love for music and song. (L. Sauni, 10 October 2010, personal communication)

The Sociocultural Domain

Teachers expect, and are faced with, the challenge of recognizing and acknowledging cultural practices of their students. Songs provide a rich context for recognizing and celebrating cultural diversity, and for developing an understanding and appreciation of different languages. An obvious connection between music and language is the sharing of songs that teach basic vocabulary, including counting songs and action songs that teach the names of body parts or colors. An example is the “Colour Song” which is partly in English, and partly in Māori. The first verse begins as follows:

Ma is white, whero is red, kakariki green . . .

At a deeper level, some songs express values and tell stories, often rich in metaphor and imagery. For example, the first of the song *Kōrero Māori E* (talk Māori) written by Hirini Melbourne translates as follows (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 17):

Ke topu manu nei au i te rangi
I hover like a bird in the sky
E kawē nei ngā rau mō te reo Māori
Carrying the leaves of te reo Māori
Hei hanga kōhanga mō ngā pipi e
To make a nest for the young
Kia tipu ake ai te hunga
So that they can grow

In New Zealand, the national curriculum requires an acknowledgment of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (Treaty of Waitangi), and it is through the use of *waiata* (song) that children may acquire an understanding of *te reo Māori* (the Māori language). As well as developing knowledge of the language, the origins and purposes of each song may provide a rich insight into cultural values of Māori (Moorfield, 2000).

The fusion of music and language in both Māori and Samoan cultures is steeped in tradition, and it is crucial to provide an historical and cultural context in order to recognise the significance of song from these two cultural perspectives for today's children (Trinick, Sauni, & Allen, 2010, p. 4).

The Cognitive Domain

The past decade has seen a wealth of new discoveries about the cognitive connections between language and music, and although neuroscientists and music educators may appear to live in quite distinct worlds, there may be opportunities for both to benefit (Abril, 2010; Lems, 2001; Patel 2008). Sacks (2007) suggests that music has the ability to stimulate the brain in ways that nothing else can, leading to higher level thinking (Lee, 2009).

One only has to consider advertising jingles to realize the impact of song on memory. Some adults may recall the "Alphabet Song" or counting songs from early childhood days. Murphey (1996, cited in Macias, 2008) describes this as the *song stuck in my head* phenomenon. Woolley (2010) discusses the importance of working memory to effectively operationalize cognitive processes that connect verbal and visual information. Indigenous cultures have, for centuries, passed on stories and genealogies through songs and chants. This transfer of cultural knowledge through narratives is a significant factor in the retention and revitalization of the Māori language (Moorfield, 2000).

The Linguistic Domain

Children absorb as well as acquire language through song, so that after several repetitions the language begins to be internalized. In this way, children begin to make meaning of the ideas they are receiving (Ministry of Education, 1996). Romeo (2002, cited in Woolley, 2010), believes that enhanced visualization arising from the reading aloud of rich descriptive texts leads to improved comprehension. Lowe (2002) and Perret and Fox (2006) also stress the importance of the context that song can provide for meaningful learning.

Classroom teachers may not consider the text of a song as a useful reading tool; thus, there is a tendency to overlook familiar, everyday materials and resources (Tracy, 2000). Young children's readers are designed to aid children's memory and retention in the early stages of reading and, when considering both readers and songs that are designed specifically for young children, there are commonalities in features such as rhythm, rhyme, repetition, and refrain.

Where a picture book has visual language accompanying the text, song text invites children to create their own images based on the words and their meanings, with the bonus of a melody and rhythm to add affective and sensory appeal (Jalongo, 1988, p. 67). It is through the repetition of familiar words sung rhythmically, that children practice syntax and semantics, with a fluidity that may not be present with words alone (Trinick et al., 2010). Kenney (2008, cited in Moore, 2009) states that song could be considered as "simply language intensified" (p. 57).

Song Choice

Clearly, to *unpack* every song that children enjoy might diminish the aesthetic appeal and sheer joy of singing. Teachers' tacit knowledge and common sense must prevail when selecting when and how to use texts of particular songs for language-learning outcomes. Whatever the purpose, classroom repertoire should be selected with the same degree of purpose and deliberation that is used when selecting other shared reading texts.

Beasley and Chuang (2008) identify several song selection criteria based on results of their own research as well as on the experiences of others, including Abbott (2002) and Lynch (2006). Criteria include: likeability, understandability, use of natural speech, repetition, level of interest and relevance and positivity. When selecting material that reflects cultural issues, Paquette and Rieg (2008) alert teachers to select songs with caution.

To help teachers locate authentic and appropriate cultural repertoire, the New Zealand Ministry of Education has provided schools with a range of useful singing resources in a

range of languages, including Māori, Samoan, Niuean, Tokelauan, and Tongan. Each of these has been endorsed by an advisory group and is deemed to be culturally safe for all teachers to use.

Issues

Considering the wealth of supporting literature that argues the benefits of song for language learning, the question must be asked: Why is this not common practice? Macias (2008) offers several reasons for this, such as lack of teacher expertise, skepticism, concern about noise levels and behavior, fear of detracting from the *main* curriculum, wasting of time, and inappropriate models of language.

Lack of teacher expertise is an issue for all areas of the curriculum but perhaps more so in music, where confidence and skill are required to model accurately. It is important to make a distinction between the *teaching of singing* and *using song*. This distinction may help, to some degree, alleviate anxieties associated with the modeling of singing and also endorses the use of audio recordings in the classroom. One idea for teaching a new song that, through discussion with teachers, appears to be successful is to play the *new* song each day over a week at appropriate times, such as before school, after break, or as tidying up music at the end of the school day. In this way, children become familiar with the rhythm and melody before focusing on the lyrics and associated text features.

Skepticism, fear of detracting from the *main* curriculum, and wasting time, are closely connected and reflect a lack of understanding of the contribution that the use of song can make to language development, despite a wealth of supporting research. As discussed throughout this article, the use of song text should be perceived to be adding value, rather than taking away, but without commitment and belief, change is unlikely.

The argument relating to *loss of control* certainly has validity, but may well be a temporary issue, when children become excited if they are not used to singing in their classrooms on a regular basis (Macias, 2008). Once established as a normal classroom routine, children will accept that regular singing is the norm. As Kenney (2009) states in her discussion about singing games, “Once the teacher learns to trust that the children will learn in the context of the whole singing game experience, the teaching is actually easier because the children take more responsibility for their own learning” (p. 25).

Children should be exposed to different genres and models of language that are authentic. What is deemed to be *inappropriate* is relevant to a particular context. Once again, teachers’ common sense will inform decisions relating to choice of repertoire. With such an abundance of

songs to select from, it would seem nonsensical to select material believed to be inappropriate.

Establishing a Singing Environment in the Classroom

Hutia te rito o te harakeke, kei hea te kōmako e kō?
If you pluck the centre shoot of the flax bush, where
will the bellbird sing?

This *whakatauki*, or Māori proverb, uses imagery to convey not only the essential nature of singing as a form of expression but also the importance of ensuring that the environment is right for singing.

Imagine a school day in a musically-enriched classroom. Children arrive at school and recorded music is playing. Just before the bell is due to ring, the class *song of the week* is played. This is the signal to come to the mat, and everyone joins in with the singing. The roll is sung, integrated with spontaneous musical conversations that continue throughout the day. Rhythm patterns based on the *sound of the day* are practiced, and this becomes the attention signal through the day. The daily Mathematics session begins with counting chants and number songs. Music is played as a cue to tidy up and sit on the mat ready for morning break. The song of the week is the focus for shared reading, and vocabulary and language features in the text of the song provide a learning focus. The words of known songs are readily available in the reading corner and children look forward to completing their tasks, so they can read through the lyrics of favorite songs. There is a sounds table where children are encouraged to engage in musical play. Quiet music is playing when children come in after lunch break, and this helps settle children for a peaceful afternoon. The weekly song is played again just before the final bell as a cue for tidying up and getting ready to go home. If there is time, children look forward to a *lucky dip* song, when one child pulls out a card on which there is the name of a known song, or a blank card, which allows the child to choose a favorite song.

Once singing has become an integral feature of the classroom environment, language-learning possibilities may be maximized. As with any text, each song will offer particular language features worthy of drawing attention to, such as parts of speech, vocabulary, semantics, syntax, and rhyming words.

Because children naturally engage in songs and love to sing them over and over again, the crucial tenets of language—pronunciation, inflection, vocabulary, parts of speech, language patterning and sentence formation—are solidified with each singing experience. (Kenny, 2008, in Moore, 2009, p. 57)

Conclusion

Increasing demands to provide evidence of achievement in the areas of numeracy and literacy can cause anxiety for both teachers and students and has contributed to an international decline in music education (Begg, 2006; Kratus, 2007). As the breadth and richness of the school curriculum is at risk of narrowing, there is an even greater need to cultivate a stimulating learning environment.

As stated earlier, there is no substitute for *music for music's sake*, but, in addition, existing language programs may be enhanced by the use of song as shared text. Although educators have relied on tacit knowledge to inform classroom practice, assimilation of research-based literature will add depth and conviction to claims about the power of song. There is clearly a need for research and ways of disseminating the findings to teachers, to draw attention to the affective, cognitive, linguistic, and cultural benefits of the use of song in the classroom. It is through relevant research that the existing paradigms of music education may be elevated beyond the common perceptions of *entertainment*.

In a local Year 4 classroom, where music is the basis of the language program, the teacher asked the children if they considered that music helped them learn. One 8-year-old child expressed to her teacher:

I think music is the secret key to all my learning.

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Bio

Robyn Margaret Trinick (LTCL[MusEd], PGDipEd, Adv-DipTchg) began her career in education as a generalist primary teacher specialising in music and has been involved in tertiary music education for over twenty years. Throughout the duration of her time in tertiary education, she has maintained a strong link with primary schools and still enjoys working with children and teachers in the community. She has a particular interest in connections between music and language learning.