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Language Learning through Songs and Poetry

"How do you expect me to teach poetry when my class can't even read a simple sentence?"

"I wish I had time for poetry or songs but I have to cover the syllabus."

"Pupils do songs in their music lesson."

"Besides I can't sing, and it would disturb the teacher next door."

"I can't use poetry because I teach English as L2."

"I can't teach poetry because I only take the class for English / comprehension / composition / history / maths."

Comments and questions like the above are heard frequently when poetry is mentioned to teachers. Although both "poem" and "song" are four letter words, must they be banished from the classroom or set aside for very restricted use? This article will argue that poems and songs can and should have a very important place in the language teaching programme.

Pupils do songs in their music lesson.

The value of songs in language teaching has been recognized for some time but for various reasons many teachers are reluctant to make singing an integral part of the language lesson. It is obvious to us all that we remember words and phrases most easily when they are set to music (a fact TV commercial and "Sesame Street" writers are well aware of). When a word or a grammatical structure is used in a song, it may be learned better and faster than through drill or language exercise. Certainly time spent in singing will be a more pleasant activity for the majority of the pupils, and may offer a very desirable change of pace in the lesson. As these various benefits are so easily obtained, it is only sensible that songs should be a standard and frequent activity in both primary and secondary level language lessons.

A teacher can make use of songs in two ways. The first is rather random as far as language items are concerned. You just teach songs you think the children will like, and/or songs they should know. You do a brief explanation, perhaps, of what the words mean, and then you listen carefully to ensure correct pronunciation as the children sing.

On a more systematic basis, however, you choose (or adapt) songs to introduce or reinforce specific selected vocabulary items, grammatical structures or pronunciation. For example, present tense and possessive pronouns are absorbed as children sing (to the tune of "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush") "This is the way we wash our hands / brush our hair / eat our rice / come to school" etc. Pictures or drawings on the board can be used to indicate subject changes for I / he / she / you / they, with the correct pronoun. "On a cold and frosty morning" becomes "at six o'clock in the morning" and this line also can be varied if the teacher wishes to include time review. Present continuous verbs will be reinforced with "London Bridge is Falling Down" in its original version or by singing "What is (Kok Seng) doing now?" The last line can either repeat the question with contraction and pronoun, "What's he doing?" or, perhaps prompted by a picture, it can supply the answer. Alternatively, to give more practice the reply comes in its own stanza, "Kok Seng is eating now . . . That's what he is doing."

While secondary school pupils would undoubtedly be insulted if asked to sing such simple songs, the same approach can be used with different materials. A tape by a singer or group the class knows can teach a song like "If I were a carpenter and you were a lady, would you . . ." — a far more effective teaching method for subjunctive and conditional than the usual drills. Both standard records and those prepared specifically for language learning can be used, and there are many books on the subject, a few of which (available at the Regional Language Centre) are listed below.

I can't sing.

There are very few of us who truly cannot sing. Almost everyone can croak out enough of a tune to teach it to children. Perhaps it's more a matter of losing our inhibitions. But if you are one of the very few people who absolutely cannot carry a tune (even in a bucket, as the saying goes), have someone do a one finger piano recording on tape, play it a few times in class, and let the children go to it. Using familiar tunes like "London Bridge" avoids the problem but can be very limiting after a while.

It disturbs the class next door.

So does having the whole class chant in unison as they "read" aloud. No one complains about this kind of noise. (They should. What the children almost inevitably learn in this activity is very poor non-English intonation, rhythm and even pronunciation. They are comprehending very little, if anything, and more importantly, they are not learning how to do *silent* reading – the only kind that matters.) We need to recognize the fact that unless language is taken in only three of its aspects – comprehension, reading and writing – language classes by definition must involve noise as children practise speaking. Speaking may well be the most important aspect of English for the majority of our pupils when they leave school, and it is in many ways the hardest skill to teach in the classroom situation. Through songs and poems, children are given oral practice which they need so badly. As they are repeating sentences which have been set to fit a particular rhythm pattern, they are far more likely to be learning correct intonation and stress patterns than they are when the class is set to reading prose passages aloud.

Just as children presumably have learned to ignore this kind of noise from the class next door, so too they can learn to tune out singing. One would hope that their own lesson would be so interesting that they wouldn't even hear it. Teachers of course can always check with neighbour teachers to see if one time would be less disturbing than another. The class should not have to move to a special room, as songs should be an ordinary part of regular class work.

How do you expect me to teach poetry when my class can't read a simple sentence?

I can't use poetry because I teach English as L2.

Both of these objections are based on the assumption that poetry is hard to understand. This is a

common belief which has arisen out of unsuitable selections for literature classes as well as the genuine obscurity of some poets. But just as literature doesn't have to be Literature, so too a poem doesn't have to be a Poem. Teachers shouldn't think that all poetry needs to be "taught." There is a vast number of poems which are simple and direct in language and content, which can just be read. In fact, a beginning or poor reader may well be less intimidated by a poem than he is by a paragraph of prose because there may be fewer words, and he hasn't yet learned that poems are supposed to be hard. The pleasure we all find in rhythm and rhyme patterns also may be enough incentive to pull him over a few bumps in language. While we are always being cautioned that poems should not be treated as comprehension exercises, in fact reading skills are much the same no matter what we are reading. Poems like the following are simple in vocabulary and structure and provide every bit as much language practice as do reading passages. They may also be a great deal more interesting than much of the material in current texts. (There are innumerable poetry books for teachers and pupils to take poems from. A few are listed below, and the National Library, bookshops and school libraries will provide more.)

My Favourite Word

There is one word –
My favourite –
The very, very best.
It isn't No or Maybe,
It's Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes, YES!

"Yes, yes, you may," and
"Yes, of course," and
"Yes, please help yourself."
And when I want a piece of cake,
"Why, yes. It's on the shelf."

Some candy? "Yes."
A cookie? "Yes."
A movie? "Yes, we'll go."

I love it when they say my word:
Yes, Yes, YES! (Not No.)

–Lucia and James Hymes

Although doctors no longer wear hats or make house calls, this poem will easily carry readers along with its energy. It could be used in a vocabulary lesson, to reinforce past tense, or as

pronunciation to stress correct vowel sounds in "sick", "quick", "pill", "bill" (rather than "seek", "queek", "peel", "beel").

Miss Polly had a dolly who was sick, sick, sick.
So she phoned for the doctor to be
 quick, quick, quick.
The doctor came with his bag and his hat,
And he knocked at the door with a rat-tat-tat.
He looked at the dolly and he shook his head.
Then he said, "Miss Polly, put her straight to bed."
He wrote on a paper for a pill, pill, pill;
"I'll be back in the morning with my bill, bill, bill."

– Anon.

The next poem could be used for vocabulary (adjectives, parts of the face) or as an excellent *th* pronunciation exercise: note repetition of "think", "things", "teeth" with the voiceless *th*, and "their", "they", "the" with voiced *th*.

Mice

I think mice
Are rather nice.

 Their tails are long,
 Their faces small,
 They haven't any
 Chins at all!
 Their ears are pink,
 Their teeth are white,
 They run about
 The house at night.
 They nibble things
 They shouldn't touch
 And no one seems
 To like them much.

But I think mice
Are nice.

– Rose Fyleman

"The Folk Who Live in Backward Town" could be used for an imaginative essay, art work and oral discussion, or even as a preposition exercise if given to pupils with blanks to fill in.

The folk who live _____ backward town (in)
Are inside out and upside down.
They wear their hats _____ their heads (inside)
And go to sleep _____ their beds. (beneath)
They only eat the apple peeling
And take their walks _____ the ceiling. (across)

– Mary Ann Hoberman

A teacher-in-training once said that the following poem would only confuse the pupils. Obviously it wouldn't be suitable for primary one, but older children enjoy it because they are pleased that they can see the joke. It is also good for phonic sounding out of nonsense words.

Eletelephony

Once there was an elephant,
Who tried to use the telephant.
No! No! I mean an elephone
Who tried to use the telephone.
(Dear me! I am not certain quite
That even now I've got it right.)

Howe'er it was, he got his trunk
Entangled in the telephunk;
The more he tried to get it free,
The louder buzzed the telephee.
(I fear I'd better drop the song
Of elephop and telephong!)

– Laura Richards

While the next poem has more vocabulary which may need explaining – bother, misbehaves – the rhythm, rhyme and alliteration are easy to enjoy, and the familiar situation could spark off a lively oral English or composition exercise on brothers and sisters.

Brothers

I had a little brother
And I brought him to my mother
And I said I want another
Little brother for a change.
But she said don't be a bother
So I took him to my father
And I said this little bother
Of a brother's very strange.

But he said one little brother
Is exactly like another
And every little brother
Misbehaves a bit, he said.
So I took the little bother
From my mother and my father
And I put the little bother
Of a brother back to bed.

– Mary Ann Hoberman

Each teacher and each class will have different selections, and teachers will make use of the same poem in different ways – for reinforce-

ment of language structures, for pronunciation practice, for vocabulary introduction or review, for comprehension, for discussion, for composition — the important thing is that children be allowed to enjoy a variety of accessible poems.

I'd like to do poems but I have to cover the syllabus.

This objection overlooks the fact that poetry is the syllabus, along with oral language and reading and writing. The *Syllabus For English Primary One and Two* through *Five and Six* has a recommended scheme for English that allots one third of the total time for "enrichment" activities. (See Foreword.) For some reason these activities are seen as expendable by many teachers. If "serious" activities such as language drills and exercises were achieving totally satisfactory results, one could not fault teachers for interpreting the syllabus so narrowly. The fact that language results are not seen as being satisfactory suggests that we may need to rethink the classroom activities.

I can't use poetry or songs because I only take the class for . . .

As has been stated earlier, songs or poems can be the basis for any kind of activity from reading to writing to speaking to grammar review to spelling. Nor is it only the English or literature teacher who can utilize them. History classes might enjoy

Ancient History

I hope the Romans
Had painful abdomens.

I hope that the Greeks
Had toothache for weeks.

I hope the Egyptians
Had chronic conniptions.

I hope that the Arabs
Were bitten by scarabs.

I hope that the Vandals
Had thorns in their sandals.

I hope that the Persians
Had gout in all versions.

I hope that the Medes
Were kicked by their steeds.

They started the fuss
And left it to us!

— Arthur Guiterman

While some of the vocabulary in the poem is difficult, the idea is clear, and one the children may have some sympathy with. Science teachers might make use of "The Microscope".

Anton Leeuwenhoek was Dutch.
He sold pincushions, cloth, and such.
The waiting townsfolk fumed and fussed
As Anton's dry goods gathered dust.

He worked, instead of tending store,
At grinding special lenses for
A microscope. Some of the things
He looked at were:

mosquitoes' wings,
the hairs of sheep, the legs of lice,
the skin of people, dogs, and mice;
ox eyes, spiders' spinning gear,
fishes' scales, a little smear
of his own blood,

and best of all,
the unknown, busy, very small
bugs that swim and bump and hop
inside a simple water drop.

Impossible! Most Dutchmen said.
This Anton's crazy in the head.
We ought to ship him off to Spain.
He says he's seen a housefly's brain.
He says the water that we drink
Is full of bugs. He's mad, we think!

They called him *dumkopf*, which means
dope.

That's how we got the microscope.

— Maxine Kumin

For maths, Carl Sandburg has given us

Arithmetic is where numbers fly like pigeons
in and out of your head.
Arithmetic tells you how many you lose or
win if you know how many you had
before you lost or won.
Arithmetic is seven eleven all good children
go to heaven — or five six bundle of sticks.
Arithmetic is numbers you squeeze from
your head to your hand to your pencil
to your paper till you get the answer.
etc.

Even sports and P.E. are represented, for instance in *The Sidewalk Racer and Other Poems of Sports and Motion* by Lillian Morrison (available from the National Library).

Photo Finish

Two track stars ran a race
and neither knew defeat.
Both perished at the tape;
they called it a dead heat.

The Knockout

The shortest fight
I ever saw
Was a left to the body
And a right to the jaw.

As we frequently remind our teachers-in-training, anyone who teaches in English teaches English, and we all need to take as many different approaches to our subjects as possible.

There is, however, another aspect of the complaint voiced above which I'd like to call to the attention of any administrators and/or schedule planners who may have read along this far. All schools have scheduling difficulties and perhaps problems of too many teachers in one subject and not enough in another; but the dividing up of classes' English time among more than one teacher does not work to the children's advantage. Even an area as seemingly mechanical as spelling can only be taught in a meaningful way by a teacher who can relate spelling to the other English activities which the class is doing. In secondary school, pupils can benefit immensely by having one teacher for both English and literature so that these subjects can be integrated. It makes little sense for the English teacher to search frantically for new composition topics ("My Favourite TV Programme" or "An Interesting Relative") when there are so many topics which come logically out of literature reading and discussion but which three periods a week allow no time to follow up. It is to be hoped that in the near future, scheduling will be done for academic rather than administrative reasons. €

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*The place where the book is available is shown within brackets. RELC is the Regional Language Centre, Singapore.