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Author(s)	Cheng, Louise S. C.
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LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH SONGS

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LOUISE S C CHENG

How many of us enjoy listening to “catchy” tunes and soon find ourselves able to assimilate the “lyrics” as well even though the song is in a foreign language? Well-known singers on television and radio programmes present songs from various countries. They sing with fervour and conviction, knowing perhaps the general meaning and mood the song conveys, yet they do not appear to have difficulty in enunciating the words in a foreign language.

Music educators have been aware of the influence music has on the learning situation for children in Special Education. Songs have been specially written with grammatical objectives in mind. The correct sentence-structure for questions and answers, tenses and phrases are all considered in these pedagogical songs. Lessons in English using pop songs can be heard on Radio I every Wednesday evening for the adults who would like to improve their spoken English.

Well, music teachers in schools, how about introducing this idea of teaching English through songs as an additional remedial teaching tool for your pupils who come from a dialect-speaking or Mandarin-speaking environment and who need help in their English? Try to see things from the children’s point of view. “Our modern civilization demands more of the child than ever before . . . Many children are coming to school lacking in basic perceptual-motor skills . . . As a result they become slow-learners in the classroom,” commented Kephart (1971), “lacking the sensory-motor skills which are required by the more complex activities of reading, writing, and arithmetic.”

Have I “triggered” off some interest in your mind yet? Would you like me to recommend some songs which you can adapt for the teaching of English? Starting with the pre-primary classes, let us begin with Deanna Hoermann’s Kodaly-based songs. The tunes are usually eight bars long, using a few repeated pitches based on the tonic triad or the pentatonic scale – *doh, me, soh*, adding occasionally the *ray* or *lah* pitches.

Here are a few examples of the lyrics of the songs:

- 1 **SEE SAW** (*Soh, Me*)
 See saw Up and down
 In the sky And on the ground
 See saw Up and down
 You go up And I come down.

- 2 **TEDDY BEAR** (*Soh, Me, Re, Doh, Lah*)
 Teddy Bear Teddy Bear
 Turn around
 Teddy Bear Teddy Bear
 Touch the ground
 Teddy Bear Teddy Bear
 Show your shoe
 Teddy Bear Teddy Bear
 That will do.

- 3 **FOUR LITTLE ENGINES** (*Pentatonic Scale*)
 Four little engines Going up the track
 Four little engines Coming back.

- 4 **LEFT! RIGHT!** (*Tonic Triad – Doh, Me, Soh*)
 Left, right Left, right
 One foot up and one foot down
 All the way to Singapore Town
 One foot up and one foot down.

You will probably be asking how you are going to teach it. You decide on your method of presentation, and I will tell you mine at a later stage. We can then compare notes and see if we are on the same wave-length.

Let me mention a few songs for the lower primary classes which will interest another group of teachers. Selected songs from the *Tinderbox* will be very appropriate. Just look at this list of song-titles and you will follow my trend of thought.

Examples:

- How Many People Live In Your House?
- Slowly Walks My Grandad.
- You'll Sing A Song and I'll Sing A Song.
- I Would Like To Be.
- The World Is Big, The World Is Small.
- Who Has Seen The Wind?
- I Went To The Cabbages.

Now, finally, to provide the upper primary and lower secondary classes with similar "language through songs" backing, there is Ken Wilson's collection of songs entitled *Mister Monday*. The "kit" includes a recorded cassette tape and an instructional manual, so there is no need for me to explain the procedures and the approach to each of the songs supplied. The songs are written in contemporary syncopated style, sung by a male and a female, accompanied by a guitar.

Here are four examples that will give you a little insight into the contents of the above-mentioned book.

- 1 Present Continuous Tense – I'm Walking Down A Street.
- 2 Present Tense (Simple) – Mr Monday: He Gets Up At Eight O'clock
- 3 Future Tense (Simple) – Tomorrow Will Be Wonderful.
- 4 Past Continuous Tense – Alice's Song: What Were You Doing When I Saw You At The Stable, Alice?

Finally we come back to the topic of methodology – a conceptual approach. I shall select three examples each for the pre-primary and lower primary levels. Mime and actions will assist the children in understanding the meaning of the new words introduced in each song, the kind of sentences and the type of phrases (adjectival or adverbial) used.

- 1 TEDDY BEAR
Concept: Sentence – A Command
turn around touch the ground
show your shoe that will do

- 2 FOUR LITTLE ENGINES
Concept: Number – Four; Directions – Going up,
coming back. The number “four” can be changed
to “eight”, which will help to integrate the learning
of multiplication tables.

- 3 LEFT! RIGHT!
Concept: Directions – Left Right
To substitute a proper noun (place) having
three syllables.
e.g. SINGA-PORE TOWN
ANG MO KIO
TOAPA-YOH
OR-CHARD ROAD

Often children are not aware of the meaning of “left” and “right”. They will happily march but not according to the words of the song. Although the original “place” mentioned in this song is “London Town”, children will feel that the song is related to their own experience if place names that they are more familiar with could be used to substitute for the less familiar ones. Creativity is demanded in this way.

With reference to the songs selected from *Tinderbox*, these are my three examples:

- 1 How many people live in your house?
Concept: Question and answer type of song

- 2 You’ll sing a song and I’ll sing a song.
Concept: Future tense

- 3 I went to the cabbages.
Concept: Past tense

Songs which are related to the children’s daily experiences (their fears, laughter and celebrations, their relationship with friends and family) widen the world around them. Songs from the *Tinderbox* need simple instrumental accompaniment; unpitched percussion instruments enhance the music lessons tremendously.

I suggest that you try this new teaching strategy for your extended and monolingual stream classes as well.

References

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