

Music as a Teaching Tool

Learning Through Singing

Jeanette Castro Hachmeister

All teachers, brand new ones to very seasoned, need quick, easy-to-use tools to help them teach. This article gives teachers information from current research plus plenty of examples on how to use songs in their classrooms.

At his workshop entitled “Scaffolding Writing Instruction,” Dr. Michael Heggerty, an expert on literacy, stated that the average class has five academic levels within one grade. How does a teacher reach all five levels within one class period? What is developmentally appropriate for students? How does a teacher reach the students who have language issues due to hearing loss, dual languages at home or other factors? How do teachers reach students with special needs that are included in their classroom? Music is a tool that is developmentally appropriate, facilitates language fluency, helps brain development and, above all else, is joyful.



Current Research

Renate Nummela Caine and Geoffrey Caine (1990) identified 12 current brain-based principles that explain how thoughts, emotions, imagination and predispositions operate concurrently. These systems need to develop in a stress-free yet novel environment where the learner can pattern current stimulation into embedded natural spatial memory and their constantly engaged register of experiences into three-dimensional space (O’Keefe & Nadel, 1978). Meaningful learning requires “relaxed alertness, immersion and active processing” (Caine & Caine, 1990).

Music allows learners to acquire information naturally and presents information as parts and wholes. A song gives students a chance to reduce the information into parts yet work with it as a whole. Frances H. Rauscher (2003) explored the relationship between spatial/temporal skills and music with high risk preschoolers and conducted three studies that examined the effects of music. The children who received music training scored higher on the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT) in reading, spelling, reading comprehension, mathematical reasoning, numerical operations and listening tasks. Rauscher concluded:

“Learning music is an important developmental activity that may help at-risk children compete academically on a more equal basis with their middle-income peers...improvement on the spatial-temporal tasks was confined to those children who received music instruction...the music instruction was found to continue for at least two years after the intervention ended.”



In another study by Rauscher and colleagues, music training gave a significant boost to spatial-temporal memory (Rauscher et al., 1997). In this study, 78 preschoolers were divided into two groups with one group receiving music instruction. The researchers tested if music cognition

would activate the same neural activities as those in spatial-temporal reasoning. This type of reasoning maintains and transforms mental images without a physical model and is used in both mathematics and science. The researchers found that:

“Music training, unlike listening, produces long-term modifications in underlying neural circuitry (perhaps right prefrontal and left temporal cortical area) in regions not primarily concerned with music. The magnitude of the improvement in spatial-temporal reasoning from music training was greater than one standard deviation equivalent to an increase from the 50th percentile on the WPPSI-R standardized test to above the 85th percentile.”

Students with low language levels could benefit the most from this increase in memory.

Music benefits children’s oral communication. They learn to be attentive listeners, which is a skill that helps their phonological awareness, phonemic awareness and overall fluency. When teachers use music naturally, they expand vocabulary, promote sight words, identify rhymes and retell stories. According to Wiggins, simple songs such as “[Down by the Station](#),” when coupled with a book, “nurtures auditory and visual discrimination, eye-motor coordination, visual sequential memory, language reception and, most importantly, promotes comprehension and dialogue” (Wiggins, 2007).

Let’s examine how an early elementary teacher can use music for her/his students who have language delays.

Use Music to Teach Routines

The children at Child’s Voice School in Wood Dale, Ill., alternate between their homerooms and specialized Learning Centers. They go from a small environment of two to three students to a larger one of 10 to 23 students, about every 30 minutes. When they enter the Learning Center, they need to clean their hands with a sanitizer. Common knowledge dictates that the students need to rub their hands for a period of time to ensure that their hands are clean. Why not sing a song that talks about what they are doing and ensures that they rub their hands a proper amount of time? Remember that the students sing with the teacher at all times. Here is the song we use:

Wash Your Hands (Tune: “Brother John,” also known as “[Frère Jacques](#)”)

Tops and bottoms
Tops and bottoms
In between
In between
All around your hands
All around your hands
Now they’re clean
Now they’re clean

Children also need to learn how to clean up. Before I came up with the next song, there were many attempts to have the students clean up without repeating myself, which taught them to

ignore my statements until the fifth restatement. Now as we sing, all of us participate in cleaning up.

Clean Up Song (Tune: "[Heigh Ho](#)" from Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs)

Hey, hey! Hey, hey!

Put everything away.

In the right place, where it

Should stay.

Hey, hey! Hey, hey!

The beauty about these two songs is that it eliminates nagging, helps give the students language for what they are doing and gives them practice articulating without any pressure since it is being sung by everyone and is easily learned.

Use Music to Teach Information

Writing is very difficult for students with minimal language. They work harder to put their thoughts into words. Sometimes this activity is slowed down by the mechanics of writing, such as where do you start? I wrote a song that we sing before every writing class. We add movement to it so it can become quite an aerobic workout before we sit down to write. On wintry Chicago days, we sing the song with gusto and big movements five times in a row. Having expended their excess energy, the children are then ready to sit down and focus. The students with serious directionality issues will sing this song quietly while they are writing. It helps them focus on the left to right concept.

The Writing Song (Tune: "[London Bridge](#)")

Top to bottom, Left to right

Left to right, Left to right

Top to bottom, Left to right

That is how we write

Our students learn words such as "blends," "digraphs" and "homophones" during phonics lessons. It is hard to remember what everything means. Are blends the same as digraphs? Why are homophones so much fun to learn? Here are songs that teach the key components of these concepts. The tunes make the songs more fun to sing!

Blends (Tune: "[Addams Family](#)" theme song)

Blends are friends (snap, snap)

Blends are friends (snap, snap)

Put two letters together

You hear both of them (snap, snap)

Dr for dress Sn for snake

Pl for plant St for star

Digraphs (Tune: "[Addams Family](#)" theme song)

Digraphs are weird (snap, snap)
Digraphs are fun (snap, snap)
Put two letters together
Their sound makes one (snap, snap)
Th for thumb Ch for cheese
Sh for sheep Wh for whale

Homophones (Tune: "[Bingo](#)")

Homophones are weird words
That sound the same
But are different
Ate Eight
Night Knight
Pear Pair
Homophones are cool!

Use Music to Teach Comprehension

In my classroom, the day ends with a story. We read a story for two weeks. If it is a classic story, we read many versions. We then compare and contrast key elements of the story. If the story is a current one, we read parts of it for one week and then on the second week read it entirely again. Every Monday we look at all the story songs and sing all of them. (The songs are clipped together by a ring for easy flipping.) Each story gets a song and by the end of the semester the class sings about 10 songs. The beauty of this activity is that it helps the students remember the story, gives the students words to express what happens in these stories and is a tool to help the students comprehend key elements of the stories.

Let's take the classic story "The Gingerbread Man." Most children are familiar with this story. One key component is that the Gingerbread Man loves to run and is feeling "cocky" that he can outrun everyone. When the children learn this song, they become the Gingerbread Man. They can use their sassy voices to sing. At the end of the story, they can sing the same lyrics in a pathetic manner since they have been eaten by the fox.

The Gingerbread Man (Tune: "[ABCs](#)" song)

Catch me, catch me if you can
I'm the little gingerbread man
I can jump and I can run
Faster, faster. It's fun, fun, fun
Catch me, catch me if you can
I'm the little gingerbread man

The great thing about writing songs for the stories that the students study is that you reinforce the story line, its vocabulary and crucial elements all within a 30-second time frame. You can sing these songs whenever you have a break. When you need to discuss stories and its similarities and

differences, the children can recall the story just by breaking into song. The stories become part of their long-term memory. (Every song is sent home for the students to put into their home binder, which they use at their discretion.)

Imagine introducing a brand new story. How do you help your students remember the sequence of the story? How do you recreate the atmosphere of the story? By using a tune like “Brother John,” the teacher can sing a line and have the students repeat. Our curriculum is based on the formula of modeling and imitation. The teacher models the appropriate language (syntax) and the student repeats. In the next song, the entire story is described. The song that the boy sings in the original story is used at the appropriate moment. The children sing the entire story and enjoy the defeat of the giant, Abiyoyo.

Abiyoyo (Tune: “Brother John,” also known as “[Frère Jacques](#)”)

A long time ago (A long time ago)
A boy and his dad (A boy and his dad)
Played the ukulele (Played the ukulele)
And did magic (And did magic)

Nobody liked them (Nobody liked them)
The ukulele was loud (The ukulele was loud)
Magic make things disappear (Magic make things disappear)
“Get out” said the people (“Get out” said the people)

One day the sky was red (One day the sky was red)
And the ground shook (And the ground shook)
Abiyoyo came to town (Abiyoyo came to town)
“Run for your life” (“Run for your life”)

The boy had an idea (The boy had an idea)
To make the giant fall down (To make the giant fall down)
He would sing his song (He would sing his song)
And Abiyoyo would dance (And Abiyoyo would dance)

[All sing eight measures of “Abiyoyo” going faster and faster. See the book for the tune. The one child playing Abiyoyo would dance faster until he/she fell down.]

Abiyoyo fell down (Abiyoyo fell down)
His father said “Zoop” (His father said “Zoop”)
Abiyoyo disappeared (Abiyoyo disappeared)
Hooray for the boy! (Hooray for the boy!)

This song provides knowledge and answers “who-what-where-when” questions. The song also helps with student comprehension, answering “why-how” questions.

Use Music for Fluency and Fun

Children with language delays work harder for every word spoken. It is a “Catch-22” situation when the harder it is to talk, the less likely it is that the child will want to talk. Through song, a teacher can get these students to practice their fluency both in articulation and language. The song “[Michael Finnegan](#)” is a great example of this. The silliness of the rhymes “Finnegan” and “chinagan” and the change in tempo (you can sing it very slowly or extremely fast) make it a fun-filled way to practice speech and language.



Another song to try is “[Skip to My Lou](#).” Make a several page chart of this song with its illustrations. The students and I sing this with appropriate movements. When we get to the part of the song where the sheep are in the bathtub and we sing “Hulla-baloo,” the squealing and giggling from our movements coupled with the great illustrations makes this a hilarious, fun event rather than a “drill and kill” language/speech time.

Songs can be a handy tool for teachers trying to help their students who have delayed language. It is developmentally appropriate and so joyful that your students will not realize how much they are learning through song. Music makes learning a great adventure. Singing connects your students, especially the struggling ones, to the joy of learning.

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This article was originally published on the Golden Apple website www.goldenapple.org, under free resources.

Source: *Volta Voices*, July/August 2010