



Singing in the Education of Children

Implications for Teachers of the English Language

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Singing together is a vital component of effective education, one that should be experienced everyday. Although there are numerous social benefits received from singing together in the classroom, the central focus of this article will be on the benefits singing brings to those learning the English language as their mother tongue or as a second language.

The following is a compilation of thoughts from a rationale paper presented by Fleurette to The First Asia Pacific Symposium on Music Education Research that occurred in Seoul, Korea during August 10-12, 1997. Also included are activities that she shared with the participants in an effort to substantiate her position concerning Singing in the Education of Children.

English has become the international language of economics and trade, and as we can surmise from the directives we received for presentations at this Symposium, English has become the language of international scholarship as well. From several perspectives, then, learning to communicate in English has been catapulted to the forefront of educational systems throughout the world.

Examining common acoustical features of speaking and singing, considering ways that singing can enhance the learning of English, and presenting teaching strategies that can mesh singing activities with language exploration is the goal of this paper.

The English Language

One of the most significant acoustical features that distinguishes English from other languages is that it is a stressed language. Since stress is so inextricably bound to the interpretation and communication of meaning in English, learning to perceive, produce, and manipulate stress in word groupings, becomes an essential tool for those using English in the education of children.

Imagine how many ways a speaker can produce the simple sentence; "I'll give it to you." By placing the emphasis (the stress) on different syllables or words, this statement could convey a wide range of emotion, from a graceful offering to a reassuring agreement to a grudging or even bitter concession. Consider the change in meaning by placing stress on the capitalized words in the following

versions: I'LL give it you. "I'll give it to you. "or "I'll give it to YOU." (Kent & Read, 1992, p. 149)

Stress in English, whether contrastive or lexical, is not merely a matter of intensity but involves all three acoustic parameters: duration, intensity, and fundamental frequency. (Fry, 1955). Stress also affects segmental properties such as vowel and consonantal articulation (Kent & Netsell, 1971; de Jong, 1991). The vowel on a stressed syllable resembles more closely, what teachers of phonics refer to as "the long vowel." On the other hand, vowels which occur on unstressed syllables, lose much of their "true" sound and recede into sounds which more closely resemble the schwa (the common sound of non-stressed syllables in English, sounding like "a" in ago) no matter what the individual vowel happens to be.

Stress also effects timing. It is not uncommon for the syllables, or words, which occur on the stress, to be given more time than they would were they in unstressed positions. Another effect on timing is in the form of a "temporal clustering of syllables" around the stress. Syllables that precede the stress, press towards it ever so slightly; syllables after, seem to do the reverse.

Teaching the English Language

Little children naturally sing their language while they pursue the self-imposed task of learning to speak their mother tongue. (Papousek, Jurgens, Papousek, 1992). Most people would agree that, especially throughout the span of the elementary grades, children are engaged in the process of learning and practicing the intricacies of the phonetic system of their mother tongue.

Both oral language and singing include acoustical features that closely parallel one another, the features of pitch, intensity, and duration. These features are perceived, produced, and processed by vocal, perceptual, and neural systems common to all humans, (Couper-Kuhlen, 1986; Carlson & Granstrom, 1982; Zwicker & Terhardt, 1974; Kent & Read, 1992).

Sensing and using the natural groupings of words (phrases or chunks of language) is of utmost importance in conveying meaning of the English language. Uncovering the natural groupings of words can be problematic for non-native speakers who have little previous experience with the sound of English.

In all my years of experience as a teacher of music, and a teacher of teachers of English, I have found nothing to compare with singing and playing children's folksong games for teaching the complexities of performance of the English language.

Traditional folksongs that have become children's songs supply one of the most secure oral supports for making decisions in the matter of word groupings

because the structure of these songs is rooted in the natural oral patterning of the language.

Games provide activities that seem to "force" the music to bend with the meaning of the words causing the natural stresses in the language to surface. The intrigue of the game and the desire for more "turns" elicit repetition of the song. Once these songs and their song patterns become embedded in the imagination (in hearing, audiation), the songs form a nucleus of sounds that can be found in other songs and in common speech patterns.

Finding Stressed Syllables (using the song game Puncinella)

Walking:

Get up and walk around the room. While walking, repeat the word, Puncinella, once for each step. What syllable are you saying when your foot makes contact with the floor? The answer is "nel". Notice that the song provides the context for realizing and practicing the correct stress placement of the word.

Tapping:

Say the word, Puncinella, several times. Using one tap for each repetition of the word, tap the palm of your hand. Use first the left palm and then the right. On which syllable does the tap occur? Punc, i, nel, or la? (If you have any doubts, go back to the song the sing it. Get stuck on one of the Puncinellas and turn it into an ostinato. Then check where the tap occurs.) Notice that the song provides the context for noticing and practicing the correct stress pattern of the word.

A Code for Focusing on Stress/Unstress Patterns

If a stressed syllable is a tap on the palm of one hand, and the unstressed syllable is a gentle knock of the knuckle, how would you say the word, Puncinella, with your hands? (The answer is knock, knock, tap, knock.)

If the stressed syllable is a dash, and the unstressed syllable is a dot, how would you draw the word, Puncinella? (the answer is dot, dot, dash, dot). Draw a "dot, dot, dash, dot" on the board as a demonstration.

Word Substitution

Sing the song, and each time Puncinella occurs, accompany it with the tap/knock pattern we previously explored.

In English, there are many phrases, word chunks, and individual words which fit into the same pattern of stress/unstress syllables as Puncinella. Examples are "Mary Anna", "Want a donut?" "Go bananas". Find other words and phrases that match the stress pattern and, after checking their fit list them on large sheets of paper. Sing the song and substitute the new words for Puncinella. Playing with a pattern of sounds is the intent of this activity, rather than aiming to have the word

substitutions make sense. Often, however, the humor that results from word substitutions reinforces the real meaning of the new words because of the incongruous images evoked by the nonsense.

Conclusion

Since World War II, industrialization, cultural changes, and the pressure to supply more time for science and math have ousted from the common practice in our classrooms activities that were once considered acceptable and natural. Daily singing in the classrooms is one of these deletions. The result is that it is not unusual for our children and their classroom teachers to think that singing is not for them: that singing is something they cannot do and for which they do not have time. If our children are to reap the joys and educational benefits of daily singing in the classroom and if they are to be given opportunities to discover, analyze and practice the sound patterns of the English language, then there must be re-education of those making decisions about daily classroom practices: school boards, administrators, teachers, community members, and parents.

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