

Music: A motivator for underachieving EFL students?

A Preliminary Study Using Karaoke

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Introduction:

Probably ever since the beginning of modern education, teachers have struggled with how to engage disinterested students. Perhaps, this seems more a problem in compulsory education and in cases of learning disabilities, slow learners or in contexts where social factors influence the dynamics of classroom behavior. It may be safe to say that there are a wide variety of reasons for motivational issues, which are beyond the scope of this paper. However, in this article, we would like to explore one approach that may help ameliorate to some degree the lack of motivation for underachieving university students of EFL at a Japanese university.

This is the first part of a preliminary study on how best to integrate music, in particular, karaoke into the curriculum for low-level students so that it may enhance their affective experience and improve their motivation towards the study of English as a foreign language. This paper illustrates the obstacles encountered by teachers, as well as the successes to utilizing music in the EFL classroom.

Rationale and Support:

We are proposing that music may be one bridge to engage students in EFL language learning. This is probably not a surprising declaration since most people enjoy music. There are numerous studies in the first language literature pointing to the advantages of music in supporting learning. Music has been found to improve long-term memory of verbal material (Calvert & Tart, 1993), to aid in native language phonological awareness and literacy skills (Overy, 2003). In addition, there is support in particular on verbal memory in a language task where the music was repeated using simple patterns. This facilitates verbatim text recall

in the native language (Wallace, 1994). Of course, there are differences between L1 learning and L2 learning, but there are similarities as well.

In SLA literature, we find that music has been used as a mnemonic device (Gfeller, 1983), and to enhance prosodic feature-rhythm, stress and intonation (Parker, 2000; White & Mattys, 2007). Music has also been linked with foreign language ability (Slevc & Miyake, 2006; Pastuszek-Lipinska, 2008). Moreover, music has been associated with pronunciation ability in pitch perception (Posedel, et al. 2012), with vocabulary learning benefits by Medina (1993), increased motivation by Cook (1997), and music lowered affective barriers to learning foreign languages (Wilcox, 1995).

Goal:

Even though there is research showing potential benefit of music in foreign language learning, the aim of this preliminary paper is simply to show that music can engage students more significantly in the learning process. In this regards, we have chosen to utilize karaoke as a means to incite their interest. There has been less research on karaoke, and this may be the first step to show the connection between karaoke and improvement in foreign language learning.

Although there are some published examples of teachers using karaoke in the classroom (Patton, 2010; Pasqui, 2009; Rengifo, 2009), these were not research studies, but just reports in classroom practices. We have attempted to learn directly from our own students what works best for them, especially since they are low-level students in a Japanese university setting, which is different from the published examples given above. First, we show the stumbling blocks encountered using karaoke, and then we explore how the refinements to our pedagogical approach made karaoke a more successfully rewarding activity.

Participants:

This preliminary study included 23 students from three classes who were in their first year at a university in Japan. All of the students completed the TOEIC Bridge test when they entered the university and were placed in classes according to the results. This study focused on the lowest scoring students.

Obstacles:

In the beginning, we allowed the students to choose their own English songs and to sing them individually. This did not work for a number of reasons. First, students were too shy to sing by themselves, nor did they have confidence to sing in English. Second, even though there were a great number of English songs to choose from, most students did not know the titles of English songs, though if the song was popular, and the teacher played the song, students would often recognize the song. In addition, it was found that some of the songs that the students did know, proved too difficult in speed, in syntax and in vocabulary. Although the students were given time to watch the songs they had chosen on YouTube, in the end, they refused to sing the song in front of others, even in pairs or groups.

Refinement leads to Success:

From these experiences, the teachers refined their pedagogical approach. The following steps were found more effective during one 90-minute class:

- 1) The teacher chose one song that everyone knew and was easy enough.
- 2) The students listened to the song two or three times without lyrics while the teacher sang the song.
- 3) Next, the students were given the lyrics and asked to read them over a few times.
- 4) Then, the teacher worked with the students on pronunciation and intonation.
- 5) Next, the students sang along with the song silently as the teacher sang the song out loud two or three times.
- 6) After that, a karaoke competition ensued with two teams-groups of five or six each, boys in one group and girls in another. Each group had two microphones and they were instructed to sing loudly up close into the microphones while they were all huddled in a group with their arms around each other.
- 7) There were three rounds of the competition in order that they could become more comfortable and successful each time. Each time the karaoke machine would indicate the singer's score. The score in the third round is

what decided the final victory.

Other Considerations:

It was decided that once a month would be suitable for this kind of activity because it would be just enough to break from the usual routine of the class. If they did it more often, it was surmised that the appeal might diminish. Observations by the teachers seemed to indicate that the students were really engaged in the activity and enjoyed it very much. Based on this observation by the teachers, further definitive criteria of judgment must be employed in order to claim that the students benefited from the karaoke activity in terms of learning and motivation.

Further research:

Possible benefits from this activity need to be further explored, but may include improvements in phonology and intonation, word recognition, self-confidence in speaking and singing in front of others.

This has been only the first step at engaging students in their EFL studies using karaoke. In the second installment, through further refinement of our pedagogical approach, we would like to administer pre and post interest and motivational surveys in addition to carrying out selected interviews to find out what is really engaging the students and how they could be engaged even more. In addition, there should be some investigation into how this might be affecting their English language skills in the short-term and long-term looking at various indicators of improvement in English such as prosodic features, vocabulary acquisition and syntax.

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Abstract

This paper reports on a project to motivate low-level students of EFL at a Japanese university. This first installment discusses the use of music, and in particular, karaoke on enhancing student's affective experience learning English as well as increasing their motivation to study the language. In addition, this initial paper addresses the obstacles as well as the successes of implementing such a program with first year university students. Further quantitative and qualitative research will be forthcoming in a second installment that will measure the influence on student's motivation and learning.