

FIVE REASONS WHY MUSIC HAS A PLACE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

As teachers, we need to continually experiment with new methods and ideas in teaching. Unexpected methods sometimes prove to be the most effective.

Key words: music, engage students, efficient and effective ways of learning.

Как учителя, мы должны постоянно экспериментировать с новыми методами и идеями в обучении. Неожиданные способы иногда могут оказаться наиболее эффективными.

Ключевые слова: музыка, вовлечь студентов, эффективные и действенные методы обучения.

"Eto vasha gitara?"

It was about two in the afternoon. The middle-aged shopkeeper's Russian was lyrical and fluid. I was simply looking through some ball point pens that he had on display, and trying to remember if I had brought my whiteboard markers or not. He eyed the large black canvas case on my back and repeated his question, which translated into

English was, "Is that your guitar?"

I answered in Russian, "Yes, it is."

He said, "Oh, you must be a musician."

"Actually, no. Well, yes and no. I'm an English teacher at the university. I'm going to work right now," I responded, somewhat awkwardly.

"So why are you carrying a guitar?"

Good question. Why indeed?

Why is the English teacher carrying a guitar?

It is now my fifth year teaching conversational English in Kyrgyzstan. Over the years, I have studied many different techniques and methods of teaching. Unexpectedly, my guitar has become one of my favorite tools. I love sharing my favorite songs, teaching students the lyrics, and singing together in class. Here are five reasons why music has found a definite place in my language classroom:

1. Music engages students.

Although people have different tastes in music, it is extremely difficult to find someone who has a complete distaste for music. Music has a way of waking up students and getting their attention - and this is more essential than ever in any classroom.

We sing a variety of different songs in my classroom. Some are old classics like "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." This song is particularly engaging because we have made it into a simple game: Whenever we sing a word that begins with the letter "b," we stand up if we were sitting down, and sit down if we were standing up. This game begins easily enough, but we usually sing the song three times through - and we sing it a little faster each time. By the third time, the game gets quite challenging, even for my best students!

I also enjoy using recent hit pop songs in my classroom, such as Bruno Mars' "Just the Way You Are," or One Direction's "What Makes You Beautiful." Since many students already know and love these songs, singing them is a fun and engaging way to kick off a lesson! It's also an easy way to start a discussion in the target language on *why* they feel the way they do about the song!

2. Singing improves pronunciation.

It is more difficult to mispronounce words when we sing them. When a person tries to learn how to sing a song, they usually try to mimic the song's singer in every way possible - including their tone, their emotions, and their pronunciation!

Singing also lends itself naturally to repetition. Repeating a difficult text can become tiresome and laborious for students, but repeating a song that they like singing is enjoyable! As students repeat the song, it becomes easier for me to hear and correct common student mistakes. I also take extra care to address sounds that are difficult for my students, such as the "th" sound, which does not occur in the Kyrgyz or Russian

languages.

3. Song lyrics have way of sticking in students' memories.

Music is a powerful mental anchor for students. Once a student has heard a song, the simple memory of the song's melody can pull the words back into their memory as well. In addition, the vast majority of songs employ rhyme, and so remembering just one line of a song can also trigger the memory of the next line of the song!

This is extremely useful in the language classroom, because with many songs, the lyrics provide students with many idioms and phrases that can be adapted for everyday and academic use. For example, Bruno Mars' recent hit song "Just the Way You Are" is rich with useful material. The last line of the chorus,

"Girl, you're amazing just the way you are,"

could easily be adapted into a number of everyday situations and phrases, such as:

"I love my little sister just the way she is."

"I enjoy our lessons just the way they are - please don't change them."

"The soup is fine just the way it is - don't add any more salt, okay?"

Singing new and unfamiliar phrases is an efficient and effective way for students to learn and remember phrases in context. As students learn song lyrics by heart, they lay a foundation for greater understanding and confidence in the target language.

4. Music creates natural teachable moments.

"What is a 'stormy sea'? And what does it mean to be 'filled with wonder'?"

My students raised their hands and asked me these questions and others, one after another. The song was "You Raise Me Up," a huge hit back in my home country. They really loved the song, and they understood portions of it. However, singing the song revealed some gaps in their vocabulary - and they were now anxious to understand the exact meaning of the lyrics. They couldn't help but ask for the meanings of the words!

This is a key point for us as educators. Song lyrics are a rich source of idiom and poetic style. They are also shorter than most academic texts, and so they are easier to draw from and analyze without frustrating students. If the music learned in class is carefully and tastefully curated by the instructor, music sparks curiosity, leads to excellent questions, and creates many great teachable moments.

5. Music creates a warm and pleasant classroom atmosphere.

"What was your favorite part?"

"I liked the part where we all sang together."

That was an actual student response from a talking club Christmas party that I helped organize two years ago. Music has become a truly distinctive mark of our talking clubs and lessons - and one that really defines the culture of my English classroom.

This is something mysterious, wonderful and powerful about music. For most of my students, my classroom is one of the few places where they sing. Singing grabs their attention, unites them, and sets my classroom apart as a unique place in their lives. Often, singing lifts their emotions and their moods, and also creates distance between my lesson and whatever they were doing immediately before my lesson.

Music helps build community and makes students feel more at home. As students get more comfortable with each other, trust is built, and students are free to take more risks, make mistakes and learn. Singing helps remove the inhibitions that keep them from speaking up.

Practical Applications:

Here are some suggestions for teachers to try:

- If you can play a musical instrument, particularly one that can be accompanied by singing, by all means use it in the classroom! Live music is an exciting and surprising addition to almost any classroom, and if you or someone you know can perform – Perform live in the classroom and sing together!

- If you can't play a musical instrument, don't worry! Your department likely has a set of

speakers or a CD player, or even a cassette player. Many mobile phones have a MP3 music player function, and a speaker loud enough to play music for a small classroom.

- Carefully choose a mix of songs that creatively and intentionally draw interest and build vocabulary. Bring copies of the lyrics into the classroom for students to read and study. Find songs that your students enjoy, and come back to them from time to time.

- Another option is to have your students choose the music for study! This is fun, although you may have to work together with them to find songs appropriate for your class.

- Have all of your students sing together. This is a great way to build community, improve pronunciation, and enlarge your students' working vocabulary.

Conclusion:

Music is not easy for every language teacher to integrate into their classroom, but I believe that it has many valuable applications. As teachers, we need to continually experiment with new methods and ideas in teaching. Unexpected methods sometimes prove to be the most effective.

Our goal is to help students to become creative, deep and active life-long learners - and we need to properly model that for them by being creative, deep and active students of pedagogy and the art of teaching. I would strongly encourage all language teachers to experiment with music, and pursue the benefits of a more engaged, more self-directed and more connected student body in their classroom.