

English through music : a sheltered subject matter language course

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Bulletin CILA : organe de la Commission interuniversitaire suisse de linguistique appliquée**

Band (Jahr): - **(1987)**

Heft 46

PDF erstellt am: **25.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-978116>

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English through Music: A Sheltered Subject Matter Language Course¹

1. Description

1.1 Situation and theory

In the fall of 1986, I offered a class at Neuchâtel's Université Populaire² (adult evening classes) with the following description in English:

L'anglais par la musique

A class taught completely in English, for intermediate and advanced students who wish to improve their English through the examination of Pop/Folk/Rock and even some classical music. There will be many different exercise types including written lyrics, active listening, open discussion, and the use of video. The students own musical preferences and choices will be used with the general goal being to improve one's English competence through discussion and examination of our everchanging soundscape.

One of the goals of the course was to try out what KRASHEN (1986) calls a «sheltered subject matter class». According to his input hypothesis, students acquire language by receiving comprehensible input, i.e. messages they understand. Theoretically this input can be about anything, as long as it is adjusted to the comprehension level of the students. Comprehension of the information, not correction of the form, is the basis for continuation of communication.

KRASHEN proposes that subject matter classes in the target language can be taught already at the beginning levels with such subjects as art and sports in which there are concrete actions and referents to accompany the language. Intermediate students could do math in the target language since there is a great deal of repetition and the abstraction has principally to do, for most cultures, with international numbers and symbols. Finally at advanced stages the full range of courses could be offered in the target language, and then the mainstreaming of students into regular classes with natives.

1 This report is a modified version of a paper written for presentation at the 1987 TESOL France Convention.

2 The flexible adult education programs in Switzerland offer fertile fields in which pedagogical and linguistic theory can be experimentally applied and tested. Many thanks to Mr. MERLOTTI, director of the Université Populaire Neuchâtel, for supporting this research.

The sheltered courses ideally would not have native speakers in them to assure that the teachers input level would be adjusted to the approximate level of the non-native students.

In Neuchâtel, I was dealing with an EFL situation, not an ESL one as KRASHEN seems to use for his examples. Thus there was no native speaking environment outside the class, except insofar as the music listening environment is heavily loaded with English songs and radio talk (DÜR MÜLLER 1984).

The course attracted nine students with a variety of language abilities and interests. Two students had spent a year in America, three had developed reasonable conversational sureness through travel and contact, two were true intermediates, and the last two, although having a fair reading knoweldge, were false beginners, not intermediates.

1.2 Correction and Language

At the beginning of the course I explained that this was an experimental class, that I would be giving little, if any, language instruction. I also told them not to expect me to correct them much. If I had understood the message that was enough. I did tell them I would take notes on their errors and try to reintroduce them later in the class as well formed input. Quite frankly, I rarely did this, as I found that I had trouble concentrating on their messages and «English» at the same time. It was either one or the other. Their observation that I was concentrating on their messages was more valuable, in my opinion, because they too became concentrated on the message and contributed more, in a more natural way, and without the sidetracting that correction brings on.

1.3 Classes

The first class was composed of a musical questionnaire (to discern their tastes, interests, and expectations so I could adjust to them) and a «radical opinion list» to spark discussion. Then the BBC 30 minute videofilm *Music Music Music* was shown and a song was sung at the end.

The classes thereafter dealt with various topics, usually sparked by the reading of articles that I had given at the end of the class the week before: Muzak, music in medicine, political uses, the engaged songwriters, pornography in pop lyrics, spritiuals, country music, etc. Students also did presentations of their favorite artists and songs, presenting examples in class.

For a short section of every class I tried out various EFL musical pedagogical techniques, techniques, using published materials or adapting popular songs; exercises such as cloze testing, songwriting to known tunes,

rewriting, jazz chants, writing to instrumental music, etc. While at first doing these as EFL students, they were then asked to appraise the value of the exercises, asking if they thought them a valuable way to learn. In this way it did not become an English class, but the primary object remained a class in which we were looking at and evaluating the different ways music is used.

1.4 Course duration

The class was originally scheduled for seven 90 minute sessions in the fall. However, the students requested it be continued after Christmas so another seven sessions were organized.

2. Feedback

2.1 Feedback I

At the last class of the first session in December, I gave them feedback forms to rate what they liked and to suggest further ideas themselves. The most interesting responses however were what they wrote on the back in response to the question, «What do you see as the main benefit of a course like this?» They responded as follows (texts are uncorrected):

«For me the main benefit is that, as the subject (music) is very interesting, you can forget the language and grammar problems and answer with some spontaneity.»

[the benefits are] «Listening and speaking in English about something I like.»

«- to hear english spoken and speaking english. - to learn more about music because I don't play any instrument and know really nothing about music, now I begin to be more interest in music.»

«To come together with other people, likeing also music, discover which music they listen to. To have the opportunity to speek and read english, otherwise, though, than we it when we were at school.»

It wasn't ideal for everyone. One wrote:

«Benefits, I didn't learn anything new. I had pleasure to meet other english speaking people and to get together for a 'anglophile' club.»

This last one permits us to see that it was at least a natural use of English, not artificial, and also pleasurable.

2.2 Motivations

In these comments we can decern three general motivations for taking the course: social, informational (about music), and linguistic (wanting to im-

prove their English). I feel the first two are natural reasons for communication and the third is a by-product for everyone except perhaps linguists and teachers who actually make it the information of the communication.

In a like manner, many people may give the reasons for skiing as social, fun, and good exercise. The good exercise is not however its most powerful selling point, but more of a psychological justification for having fun. Paradoxically, usually the more fun one has, the more exercise one is likely to get and then the greater we feel the need to justify it with the «good exercise» excuse. In language learning the more social and informative the exchange the more we usually augment our linguistic intake as well.

The second seven weeks, we followed the basic format of the first term except we included the video *Mary Poppins* and the music from the film into the course.

2.3 Feedback II

At the end of the term, I again gave them feedback questions, and got some interesting results. Although most admitted coming to the course to improve their English, the fact that we were to handle the topic of music attracted them as well. They had high praise for the new information they possessed about the various domains of musical use and abuse, but they had trouble naming anything they learned concerning English. They lamely said vague things like «I feel like my understanding has improved,» and «I speak more now,» but they couldn't name any tangible items.

This of course is how it should be, for after all we weren't studying language, we were studying music. But did they acquire any language? Of course they had to take in some, just as it's hard to learn how to ski without developing our muscles, albeit unknowingly. But did they learn a lot? Or more than they would have if they had gone to a language class? Instead of answering these questions directly let me try to show some things that I feel were happening that did allow for a host of «language learning opportunities», as Dick Allwright (1986) calls them.

3. Conclusions

A) *Primary motivations.* First of all, it was the subject matter, music, that got them involved and kept them coming to class, not the English. Adults more than kids often need some sort of justification for their conscience or for society; I call this a sense of «schoolishness». It's like a thin person saying he must eat a lot of ice cream to put on weight, or a businessman who explains his double martini by calling it medicine against stress, or

our previous example that skiing is good exercise. These things are all true, but they are not the primary motivations.

B) In any case, an English class of such differing levels of students would have been practically impossible, or at least terribly boring for the advanced. But doesn't it tell us something, that these same mixed level adult English speakers can all take a subject-matter class together and get along fine? The *focus was on common information and opinions* that they all had, not on their linguistic abilities. They were concentrating on the messages and ideas dealing with *information* that they would want to know and share even in their native language.

C) Because I made it clear that I was interested in the subject matter but was by no means an authority and that the students' opinions and information were very valuable to me, an *equal encounter situation was created informationally*, whereas the unequal language territory was not the focus (see THOMAS 1984). The «non corrective» pedagogy of the teacher and the patience of the more advanced students tended to down play the linguistic side, giving heavier weight to the information that each participant could generate and share. The relatively equal encounter on the information side approximated what happens in normal communication between adults.

Here, I'd like to say parenthetically that I also teach privately one on one to executives and I've noticed that if I can get them to teach me about their speciality, banking or engineering or marketing, of which I know little, they feel less inhibited by my knowing the language because they have a superiority in the information stock which is demonstratable.

4. Commentary: English for Special Purposes

Of course the sheltered subject matter teaching and my one on one experience leads us into English for Special Purposes (ESP). That is to say, that ESP usually teaches not only English but treats a subject matter at the same time, thus is intrinsically more interesting to the students. The only people who usually like traditionally taught language courses are linguists and language teachers because the subject is language. The conclusion that this brings us to is that *language courses perhaps should be taught for a specific purpose (with specific subject matter) to a specific group to simulate normal communicative activity*. It may sound absurd to insist but one must, *effective natural communication does not exist without relevant information being exchanged*.

And unless a «special purpose» can be found for the study and learning of a language then perhaps we should question whether it should be taught at all, because the teaching and learning will probably be inefficient. Music is only one topic of many possible ones. Sheltered courses can be on any topic as long as you've got a group with special interests and a desire to improve their English.

Finally, homo sapiens is an extremely practical species and doesn't want things or information for simple possession, but for what they can *do* with it. Language teachers sometimes teach as though this isn't true. It's boring running in place and reciting verb conjugations. In sports it's not easy to train and exercise to have all the right muscles without actually doing the sport. We get the muscles doing it.

And we learn a language «doing it», too. By trying to communicate with it, we develop the muscles to do it better. Sure, there are tips to help us out along the way. But a lot of good the tips will do us if we are not doing it. This is why teaching French in Texas is often about as efficient as teaching snow skiing in central Africa. People want to go somewhere and do something with their linguistic muscles.

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