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THE INTERVIEW:
Annie Hughes in conversation with Ruth Benvegnen

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ETAS J – linking the needs of English teachers and language professionals

The benefits of using rhythmic texts in the young learner (YL) classroom

Ruth Benvengen

Abstract

This article hopes to entice its readers into using (more) rhythmic texts in their English teaching to young - and less young - learners. Using both links to practice and theory, it attempts to show ways to motivate and encourage learners whose preferred learning styles are sometimes less tailored for, through a change of pace and style.

Biography

Ruth Benvegnen is a teacher trainer at Canton Vaud's Haute Ecole Pédagogique and specializes in teaching EFL didactics to future primary teachers. She has almost 30 years' experience teaching English as a foreign language, around 20 years' experience in teacher training and a Master's degree in teaching EFL to Young Learners.

Souvenir 1

Last lesson before the winter break, my very young learners were excited but nervous. At least twice as many people had come to watch them sing, armed with various recording devices. At my signal, these little ones broke out into their loud version of Twinkle Twinkle. They sang a few songs, a few times, some better than others. At the end of this mini concert, only their excitement was left. The nerves had floated away in front of their families' happy faces. The children smiled massively, some bobbing from one foot to the other in uncontained self-pride.

Souvenir 2

A class of challenging young teenagers received the instructions that they were to create a rap-chant using a selection of sentence stems expressing preferences. They had the option of adding background music. This task felt like a risk. What if they didn't take me seriously? What if they mocked each other's productions? What if they simply refused to do it? Once the task was completed, I wondered about doubting these pupils' motivation. Not all of them had been over-excited about the task, but most of them had made a decent effort and each group had managed to produce something. Yes, there had been laughter, but it was enjoyable laughter rather than undermining mockery. Some pupils asked if they could be recorded, to share with others. Some asked if they could do it again sometime. The sentence stems were satisfactorily worked on and the pupils' motivation for coming to English was reinforced.

Souvenir 3

At university, I was teaching English classes at B2 level. The students struggled with the third conditional (unsurprisingly). They persevered in trying to place every word separately in the complicated structure, already stumbling on the first past perfect part at the beginning of the sentence. In an attempt to lighten their load, I created a third conditional chant on the spot, focusing on connected speech, accompanied by clicking fingers. The students ended this lesson sounding more like natives with their chanted version of "I would have been" (I-wud'v'bin). Although some enjoyed analysing grammar structures in the course book and completing practice exercises, others found this hard and unmotivating. Once we had chanted lots of examples in a natural linked-up way, after a few times, they got it. Out of their comfort zones initially, unused to seeing their teacher groove around the language class, they finished this particular lesson with the structure in their heads. It was still in place for many the following week once I started clicking my fingers to remind them of its rhythm.

All of the above examples are ways of integrating rhythmic texts into our students' learning. Rhythmic texts can be songs of all kinds (traditional, pop, course material, etc.), raps and chants (homemade or commercial), tongue twisters, adapted texts to known tunes, background music added to spoken texts, and so on. Yet why is it that in my own experience of training pre-service and in-service teachers, rhythmic texts are not commonly included in teaching practice?

Why use rhythmic texts?

The reasons for using rhythm and melody to teach English are vast. In the above examples, there is evidence of several, such as increased motivation, encouraging natural speech, teaching grammar implicitly, drilling chunks, encouraging group cohesion, practising vocabulary, and linking content to real life and learner preferences. These elements link to various approaches, methods, and concepts of teaching English to YL and this article will touch on a few.

Natural speech practice to facilitate learning

Why is rhythmic text useful for encouraging natural speech and fluency? Gilbert (2008) says that spoken English communication is organized by *musical signals*. English is also a stress-timed language. Where I have taught English, most learners had French as their main language. French speakers potentially have the extra difficulty of pronouncing stress-timed sentences because their own language is syllable-timed, meaning that each syllable tends to have the same importance. Give learners written words like "vegetable" or "banana" or "development", and some will inevitably mispronounce them. The syllable stress will be wrong. The musical signal may be wrong. If English naturally has a *speech rhythm*, using chants and raps seems a logical way to practise it. In creating a rap for the third conditional, the learners were allowed to dispel with the over-analytical way of approaching their learning and see the structures in a more natural – musical – way. It also allowed them to split the third conditional chunk from the changing language that follows, leaving them therefore with only half the language to think about.

Affective factors that encourage motivation

Fonseca-Mora and Gant (2016, p. 5) suggest that "melodies and rhythm have the effect of creating positive emotions." I have certainly seen in practice that learners of all ages seem to enjoy the change of technique when the right conditions have been established for successfully using rap or rhythm or songs in the classroom. Despite initial reticence in some learners, the musical element tends to generate positive emotions. Pugliese (2017) strongly underlines, however, the fact that nobody can motivate another to participate in something they do not want to do or feel uncomfortable about. So even if I am particularly motivated by using music and rhythm for teaching language, I need to be aware that if the right conditions are not in place, some learners may refuse to participate. The right conditions for my 3 to 4-year-olds to feel confident enough to sing for their families took time to build up, with lots of patience, smiles, and fun practice, without going into overkill. Right conditions are linked to motivation, and motivation is a vast and complex phenomenon (Pugliese, 2017). There are many micro elements that can make a difference. However, if a teacher does create the right conditions for successfully using songs and rhythm in their language class, I would like to believe that, similar to the difficult class of pre-teens who surprised me with their *preference raps*, learners will tend to rise to, and even thoroughly enjoy, the task at hand.

"[I]f the right conditions are in place for positive group work, then collaboratively creating and performing a grammar rap or a new version of a nursery rhyme can be a connecting experience. [I]ncluding rhythmic texts and music could enable different learners to grasp and remember new language."

Learner preferences

When trying to sell the notion of using rhythmic texts and music to pre-service primary teachers, I tirelessly come back to H. Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2006). Whilst I am aware that the concept of multiple intelligences is perhaps no longer as fashionable as it was, I cannot dismiss the fact that if a challenging piece of language is chanted to me, and to some of my learners, we get it. We remember it. Something works. Something works better than if we only work on paper. If a song can reach out to learners' kinesthetic intelligence, all the better. In YL classrooms, perhaps in all learner classrooms, adding variety to learning activities can offer additional ways for language learning. Tomlinson (1999) suggests that varying points of entry when teaching language and content is a form of differentiation, so including rhythmic texts and music could enable different learners to grasp and remember new language.

Group dynamics

Although including rhythmic texts does not guarantee better group dynamics in a classroom, if the right conditions are in place for positive group work, then collaboratively creating and performing a grammar rap or a new version of a nursery rhyme can be a connecting experience. Brewster, Ellis and Girard (1992, p. 163) state that "singing and chanting together is a shared social experience and helps to develop a class and group identity." I have seen learners come to life during and after sharing a battle rap experience, or having to create a new chant with background music, or working on a seasonal chant or song to have a change of classroom rhythm.

How to use rhythm and melody?

The "how to" spectrum for using rhythmic texts in class is vast. Going from using body percussion to tap out sentence stress to creating new raps against background music within a theme, there are so many opportunities to use this other *entry point* for motivating learning in our classrooms. Space is limited here, so I shall just discuss a few of my favourites.

If we are to encourage use of creativity in the classroom, in line with the teaching approach of learning language through tasks, there are simple methods for creating chants and raps with YL that are potentially so successful. Jane Harding da Rosa (see blog in further reading) works with a code that allows learners to first analyse words, counting the syllables (excellent when dealing with a stress-timed words like "idea" and "vegetable"), putting the words into number of syllables columns, then creating simple code-based chants to learn language. For chants with longer sentences, a template can be created about a favourite singer, for example; the learners can use this template to create their own texts, and these texts can then be used as a fun warm-up activity in classes to come. Project a full text and rhythmically go through it with the pupils. Next, project the text with a few words missing. Repeat the procedure with more and more words missing, until the pupils manage to say the original rhythmic text with about half of the written words taken out. This activity is an excellent example of how rhythm helps learners remember things. It also puts value into learners' productions, promotes creativity in a supported way, and collaborative learning if the texts are created in groups. Reading out loud or listening to a dialogue can be made into a rhythmic experience by adding background music to a small text. Creating an opening routine chant with a brainstorm of greeting words and phrases offered by the learners can be an excellent way of valuing their knowledge as a whole class and revising greetings regularly.

Modern day use of Google and friends means that the arduous task of writing out song lyrics to work on them in class is over. The internet offers teachers lyrics to most songs instantly, gives pointers to songs that are useful for a particular lexis or grammar structure, and even supplies ready-made worksheets for some of these. Instead of only using lyrics to do a gap-fill whilst listening to a song, teachers can go further with the writing side, include "running dictations", peer-correction, collaboratively sorting and ordering sentences, creating "spot the mistake'' sentences, and so on. However, also remember that modern songs can have strong messages and the internet offers videos for many songs. A song can also be used to start work on a theme, such as favourite dance styles after working on Sia's Cheap Thrills video. See Davanellos (1999) for a useful list of ideas for song uses in class.

So why is it that in my own experience of training pre-service and in-service teachers, rhythmic texts are not commonly included in teaching practice? Perhaps it is because teachers fear having to sing in front of learners, worry about forgetting the words, or feeling ridiculous, or finding the right tune. However, I would like to believe that it is also due to not knowing enough of the "how to", and not offering enough time to include this fabulous tool. An example to finish with is the recent obligation for pre-service primary teachers to create their own rhythmic text for their EFL teaching exam and write a reflective text about the experience. Almost all of them wrote that they had not looked forward to the idea (in varying strengths) but had always felt proud of their work after it was finished and had discovered the benefits of rhythm in language teaching. Long may it last.

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