

CHALK TALK

Paul Davies
Instituto Anglo Mexicano
México, D. F.

TONGUE IN CHEEK

Although most approaches to the problem of English language teaching do not include the memorization of numerous rules of grammar, teachers may find that an occasional rule, if short, easy to understand and to apply, can be of help to the student. Such rules as:

1. Each pronoun always agrees with their antecedent.
2. Just between you and I, case is important.
3. Watch out for irregular verbs which has crope into our language.
4. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
5. Don't use no double negatives.
6. A writer mustn't shift your point of view.
7. When dangling, don't use participles.
8. Join clauses good, like a conjunction should.
9. Don't write a run-on sentence you got to punctuate it.
10. About sentence fragments.
11. In letters themes reports articles and stuff like that we use commas to keep a string of items apart.
12. Don't use commas, which aren't necessary.
13. Its important to use apostrophe's right.
14. Don't abbrev.
15. Check to see if you any words out.

SONG IN THE ELT CLASSROOM: A Semantic Approach

Carmen Silva, in her interesting analysis of the semantic approach to foreign language teaching, defines this approach as "... basically an attempt to do away with the grammatical syllabus... inspired by the desire to find out a possible way to overcome the barrenness into which a behaviourist structural approach has led foreign-language teaching and learning." (Silva, 1975, P. 341)

In this paper I should like to suggest some ways in which songs may be used to best advantage as an effective means of teaching a second language. I feel that songs are often omitted, or relegated to the status of a little "treat" at the end of a class, due to one or both of these ideas: 1. that there isn't enough material in a song to warrant the "production" of it in the classroom. 2. that the teacher needs a good voice to "put over" a song, or to get the students to participate. These are mistaken ideas: song in the ELT classroom can be as rewarding as it is fun.

I have found the song teaching techniques that I shall list below to closely parallel the eight principles that Ms. Silva establishes as a basis for the semantic approach translated into classroom principles. At the end of the description of each technique I shall quote an excerpt from one or more of these principles.

1) Choosing the song. It is important to consider age level, group progress and sophistication, and the teacher's ability before deciding on a song. "The Bear Went Over the Mountain" is clearly not for the same group as "Why Can't the English Teach their Children How to Speak?" Not all teachers can get the high notes and the low one of "The Star Spangled Banner." The song can be relevant - to a structure being taught (e. g., "Lazy Mary will you get up, will you get up today?"); to a vocabulary (Today is Tuesday - Tuesday roast beef, Monday stew, Sunday chicken, etc.); to an idea ("It was the ship Titanic that sailed the ocean blue, and they thought they'd got a ship that the water would never rush through."); or it can just as successfully be something the students are eager to learn because it is currently popular (e. g., a protest song or a song from the latest Cat Stevens record -- "... How many deaths will it take til they know that too many people have died...")

All songs should be checked for any possibly offensive material. Carols and hymns would not always be appropriate, nor songs with strong political connotations. Double negatives and "ain'ts" should be considered. Songs that have often been played and heard are, of course, easier to teach.

Old songs, camp songs, war songs, carols, nursery rhymes, cowboy songs, Irish songs, protest songs -- English is a rich mine of all these. Currently popular songs can be very good indeed; they can also be trite, difficult to sing without orchestration, and unrewarding as to vocabulary content. Where to find songs? Children's records, sing-along-with records and tapes, song books and anthologies of old favorites are good sources. Listen to what the young are humming. Ask adolescents what they want to sing. But check the records first when they start arriving from cherished collections:

Principle 3. "Language teaching must create the wish to communicate in the foreign language. This can be achieved through a selection of samples of the target language whose contents are appealing to the learners and through interesting classroom activities." (Silva, 1975, P. 343.)

2. Presenting the Song. I have found that it's a good exercise to play the song once (Use a tape, or record, or just sing out.) with no clues except the title written on the board, and then ask the students what they think the song story is. This encourages close listening. If they can't get any idea of the meaning, you can tell them, very briefly at this point, what it's about. (In English, if possible.)

Principle 2. "... The teacher should fully exploit the cognitive capacities of the learners because what is learned with understanding is better retained and for longer periods." (Silva, 1975, P. 343.)

3. Going over the words of the song. Some teachers prefer to pass out printed copies of the song. I like to have the students copy it out. If time is short the copying can be done as homework and the printed copies returned to the teacher. Students' copies should be carefully checked for punctuation, correct verse form, spelling, etc.; as errors can be memorized too. Then everyone should read the words aloud together, to get the "feel" of the song.

4. Considering the history of the song. Take a minute to consider the origin of the song. What "kind" (genre) of song is it? What is known about its background? its history? Songs like "Dixie" and "Old Black Joe" have much more in them than the words. Why was the song written? When? Is it a regional song?

Principle 4. "The teaching material must be selected from samples of natural language, not language especially produced and limited to suit the apparent needs of the learners." (Silva, 1975, P. 343.)

5. Translating the words. The goal here is a quick, correct, idiomatic translation, if the students are advanced enough. This can be a wonderful opportunity for learning. Point out parallels, cognates,

suffixes, prefixes, objects of prepositions, anything to give the learners a clear idea of what they will be singing. I usually have my students write down only the equivalents of words or phrases they don't understand, in small letters just over the English original.

Principle 2. "Language learning is a conscious process and not just the parroting of utterances produced by the teacher. For an act of communication to exist it must always be accompanied by understanding. Therefore the learners should have a clear idea of what they are saying and doing at every stage of the learning process. . . ." (Silva, 1975, P. 343).

6. Singing the song together. If you are singing a cappella, be sure to start high or low enough to reach all the notes. Sing loudly so that everyone can hear your pronunciation. Don't worry about individual pronunciation too much; the students correct themselves as the song goes along, and songs always repeat. Walk among the students and listen as you sing. The rhythm, the melody, and the rhyme of the words all contribute to good pronunciation and good intonation, but your example has to be loud and steady. Don't be a choirmaster, aiming for a production number. If you hit a wrong note or squeak, just laugh with the rest and go on. Be sure that everyone sings, and that everyone reads all the words until they are memorized. Repeat the song at least four times. Memorizing is amazingly easy with everyone singing, everyone reading, everyone concentrating. Vocabularies soar. The vocabulary in songs can be so unusual, so unlike that of a textbook, so varied, that words are absorbed as if by osmosis. ("There was an old lady who swallowed a fly. I don't know why she swallowed a fly!")

Principle 7. "... Meaning and interest deeply sway the learners' attitudes and these in turn largely determine the failure or success of the teaching-learning process." (Silva, 1975, P. 345.)

7. Singing the songs that were learned before. Again, be sure that each student has his copy of the words: no humming along! Songs should be kept together, close at hand, in perfect order. Each song takes only about a minute and a half to sing and repetition is the surest way to memory. A good frame for beginners is to have a chairperson who asks, "And now what would you like to sing, John?" To which John replies, "I should (would) like to sing _____."

Principle 5. "The essential condition for learning the L₂ is adequate exposure to the language in use, in both its written and its ² spoken mode. . ." (Silva, 1975, P. 343.)

8. Making new sentences with the words contained in the song. A desired structure or pattern may be selected (i.e., questions and answers in the simple past tense). Vocabularies of songs learned earlier

can be reviewed at this point and combined with the new song vocabulary, either as translations from the native language, or in response to prompts written on the blackboard (e. g. , "stew/Peter/Tuesday" becomes "Did Peter eat stew last Tuesday?" if that is the pattern chosen). Thus the student learns to use the language, re-grouping words, changing tenses, forming new patterns, - the essence of learning a new language. It is the privilege of the teacher to create new opportunities, with each new song and its vocabulary, for the students to express their own feelings and ideas, too. A song is to be enjoyed in its entirety, yes, but it is important for a language student to realize that each song can be broken into segments, combined with other segments, re-formed endlessly into new combinations. Language students need constant practice in doing this.

Principle 1. "The major aim of foreign-language teaching is to develop the learner's competence to communicate creatively and purposively through the L₂. Our aim is to teach language usage, that is language with communicative value. We should expect the students to use the linguistic elements in novel combinations for the purposes of personal expression." (Silva, 1975, P. 343.)

9. Writing new words in different contexts. A dictation is often good at this point, one that includes the most difficult of the new words. Dictations keep writing skills sharp-hearing skills, too.

I prefer to dictate sentences that show other meanings of the new vocabulary words, or other nuances of the same meanings (e. g. , "The day swallowed up the night" instead of "The old lady swallowed the fly" as in the song.)

10. Using the song as the basis for a new story or composition. This makes a good homework assignment. It can be as simple as "Write a paragraph telling me why the bear went over the mountain" or as complicated as "Write a short play, with two characters, about an incident that took place as the Titanic sank." The student should have to use his imagination. Don't correct these too mercilessly. I have found a small amount of encouragement of literary efforts here to produce amazing results.

Principle 6. "Errors are a necessary part of the learning process, since they are a means of finding out the limits to the domain of the rules of the grammar of the L₂. . . not even native speakers make semantic and linguistic choices in an automatic and effortless way, so we should not expect an unnatural level of perfection from second-language learners." (Silva, 1975, P. 345.)

Principle 8. Language learning is an active process. This does not mean keeping the learners busy. . . filling in slots in a structure, or

reciting dialogues beautifully sterilized for them!... rather, it means creating opportunities for them to invent and re-invent language for themselves, language conveying their own feelings and ideas; it means giving them freedom and time off to play with the language..." (Silva, 1975, P. 345)

Songs are rich with idiomatic expressions peculiar to English (Fly's in the sugar bowl, shoo fly, shoo!) and rich with adverbial phrases difficult to catch in a textbook ("way down upon the Swance River," "all the livelong day!" "long ago and far away", "by the time I get to Phoenix"). They are rich in regional expressions that can provide valuable insights into our culture (lack of it, sometimes!) as well as into our language ("I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus underneath the mistletoe last night!"). They provide, too, a fertile field for wrapping-the-tongue-around-words exercises (Can't get a red bird, a blue bird'll do.").

And songs have a fringe benefit: they pop the mind at unexpected times to provide a duplicate lesson. A nun who liked to observe my Friday singing classes at a parochial school in Mexico City once said to me, most reproachfully, "All through mass this morning I kept thinking, "Oh I wish I was in the land of cotton, good times there are not forgotten-look away, look away, look away, Dixie Land.!"

It's so easy to remember a song, easy and fun.

Nursery Rhymes

There Was a Crooked Man
London Bridge is Falling Down
Ten Little Indians
Oats, Peas, Beans & Barley Grow
My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean
Polly Put the Kettle On
The Farmer in the Dell
The Bear Went Over the Mountain
Lazy Mary Will You Get Up?
Mary Had a Little Lamb
Bobby Shaftoe
Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater
Hickory, Dickory Dock

Easy & Fun

How Much is the Doggie in the Window?
The Chewing Gum Song
The Animal Fair
Yellow Ribbon
Daisy (A Bicycle Built for Two)
Moonlight Bay
Smiles
S-M-I-L-E
Show Me the Way to Go Home
Old MacDonald Had a Farm
Tell Me a Story

History

Dixie
 'Til We Meet Again
 I've Been Working on the Railroad
 The Ship Titanic
 Yankee Doodle

Nostalgia

Over the Rainbow
 Side by Side
 Smoke Gets in Your Eyes
 Roses of Picardy
 It's a Sin to Tell a Lie
 The Autumn Leaves
 At Last
 Did Your Mother Come from
 Ireland?
 Walkin' My Baby Back Home
 Red Roses for a Blue Lady
 I'm Always Chasing Rainbows

Regional

Home on the Range
 California, Here I Come
 Clementine
 Swanee River
 Old Black Joe
 Chicago
 I've Got Spurs that Jingle, Jangle, Jingle
 Streets of New York (East Side, West Side)
 Little Brown Jug
 Red River Valley

Modern (and Easy)

You've Got a Friend (Carole King)
 Yesterday (Beatles)
 Moon River
 Long & Winding Road (Beatles)
 Morning Has Broken (Cat Stevens)
 Norwegian Wood (Beatles)
 Those Were the Days, My Friends
 (Beatles)
 There Are Places I'll Remember
 All My Life (Beatles)
 Sounds of Silence (Simon & Garfunkel)
 Bye-Bye Love (Simon & Garfunkel)
 The Boxer (Simon & Garfunkel)
 Moonshadow (Cat Stevens)
 Ubla Di, Ubla Dai (Beatles)

Christmas Corols

Silver Bells
 What Child is This?
 Little Town of Bethlehem
 White Christmas
 Have Yourself a Merry Little
 Christmas
 I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus
 Joy to the World

REFERENCE

Carmen Silva, "Recent Theories of Language Acquisition in Relation to a Semantic Approach to a Foreign-Language," Vol. XXIX English Language Teaching Journal edited by W. R. Lee (London: Oxford University Press), p. 341.

Dorothy Tefft
 Instituto de Idiomas
 University of the Americas