Age-appropriateness in Learning English Through Music: Insights from Grade 1-6 Teachers at Language Schools in Japan

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Abstract

A qualitative study was conducted among English teachers at a children's language school in western Japan. Participants filled out a survey designed to answer questions about the use of music and chants in the classroom, and optimal ages for employing these teaching methods. Special attention was paid to the participants' impressions of the behavior of children in classrooms where songs or chants are used, and the attitude children have towards this style of education. A particular form of music-oriented teaching, 'Math Songs,' was investigated and focused on in order to better understand reasons for the trend of students losing interest over time in singing as a means of learning English.

Introduction

Music has more than likely been used for language teaching even before a system of writing was developed and served as a way to preserve and pass on

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teaching methods in the form of oral tradition. Children normally learn through singing, and in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), this is also commonly understood to be true. However, it is also true that as children grow up, singing becomes a bit embarrassing and the child eventually withdraws from this method of teaching.

In Japan, there are many language schools that teach children of all ages even as they grow to become high school students. This is due to the fact that there is a very strong desire from parents for their children to learn English. Competition is ever–present among schools and the effort to maintain as many enrolled students as possible is unending. To make parents and children happy, we must find ways to maximize the potential of music in the classroom but not assume that children of all ages enjoy singing. Jazz chants and other forms of learning by song are common in Japan and even engrained in their culture and educational system possibly beyond what is seen in America and the UK. The differences in culture, their use of music in the classroom, and age range of students willing to sing, makes this study important for under-standing music in the classroom culture by culture.

In this study we will take a look at age appropriateness for music in the classroom so that we can better understand how to use and make material that is better suited for children of a particular age range. Since producing music for classroom use by music artists and retailers is a popular trend, this study can offer valuable insight to both of those groups. Currently, some music pro-duction companies have a difficult time creating songs that are age– and level–appropriate; for example, music that is too difficult for children to sing and at the same time is rejected by a capable older audience simply because they have out–grown that style of teaching. This study will hopefully encourage edu-

cators to better choose material for their classroom and utilize what they already have in new and motivating ways.

Of course not all music is used the same nor subject to one general rule regarding age. This is why we must focus our lens and look specifically at one particular facet of music-oriented teaching. While there are many types of chants, songs, and other speaking drills used for learning, there are some that sound natural sung, or spoken without music. It is important for us to examine chants, and song that can be sung or spoken so we can see when the children have outgrown singing. This is required so that we can see a clear-cut distinction between the optimal time for singing, and not singing (i.e. responding in chorus) for the sake of memorization.

One of the most commonly used teaching methods that fits this unique requirement is the math chant. Mathematics is of course universal – it is a subject taught in every country of the world. And for children, singing is a very easy way to remember math basics when logical faculties of the mind are not yet fully developed. Math chants, therefore, appeal to the primary need for math skills that run parallel with what is already taught in public schools; chants also exercise a student's English ability to recite numbers and mathematical equations.

The chants are usually cards with addition, subtraction, or multiplication formulas printed on them along with the answers. The teacher then holds one card up for the children to see and sings along with the children while the music plays in the background. An alternate method to this is for the teacher to hold up cards and, without music playing at all, begin to recite the math formula with the class in a steady, metronome-style rhythm.

In older elementary students, there seems to be a tendency to forgo sing-

ing and start latching onto logical recitation of the cards without including the musical components. Finding that particular age in which students make the transition from music–oriented learning to direct recitation can make a large difference in teaching attitude and material selection. Educators can then fine–tune their teaching curriculum and target individual age ranges instead of using the same material in the same way for each and every class.

Literature Review

Dörnyei (2005) reminds us there are many different styles of learning that must be taken into account, along with age, which show there are other components to one's learning predisposition. These differing styles of learning must be appealed to in order to gain the maximum effectiveness of education. Dörnyei explains how knowledge of the three major types of learning, Visual, Audio, and, Kinesthetic, would help teachers utilize different methods to help students learn the same English phrases. While there may be only one predominant style of learning in a student, Dörnyei also states that learners utilize a mixture of these methods at varying levels. He does not tell us whether the tendency towards one particular style of learning changes over time and this is one idea that must be considered. If children are inclined to respond to auditory input and reproduction but then switch to another method of learning, we as educators must be aware of that time in which an appropriate change is necessary.

We do see very often that age is a factor that cannot be ignored. Miralpeix (2006), Haznedar and Gavruseva (2008), and Johnson and Newport (1989, 1991) all support the widely held belief, initially proposed by Chomsky, that a critical age of acquisition exists and that children seem to learn a new language

faster than adults. They support the idea that there is a critical period in which rapid language acquisition exists and then after a short time in our life, prepubescence, that time has passed and language acquisition becomes more challenging. Age does matter. There is a definitive difference between the way children learn versus the way adults learn and to be even more precise, a difference in the way children learn versus the way their postpubescent counterparts do.

However, beyond the critical period hypothesis there seems to be much more going on. Bauer, Holmes, and Warren（2006）reveal there is an ongoing discussion about how children of various age ranges learn languages. They present a variety of popular beliefs on the topic while explaining their perceived merits and downfalls. Some of their ideas revolve around language acquisition and the success that each age range can possibly achieve, yet their focus does not include the effectiveness of music across those age ranges. It can surely be agreed that the style of teaching must be changed to appeal to each individual age range, but we all too often look at age ranges in general terms rather than focusing on specifics of teaching. Lightbown and Spada do narrow the focus to the individual activities that children and learners of all ages participate in, showing that different ages excel at particular activities while falling short at others（2013）. This look at the age ranges of learning helps to do away with generalization and spurs on the need of custom curriculum creation based on student age. While the need to account for age is evident, more data on particular activities among select age ranges will be helpful. This is where we must fill that gap with information that is sampled from schools teaching a second language.

We started off by emphasizing the effectiveness of music in the classroom,

but we should narrow our scope even more to see if the children are enjoying the lesson as opposed to simply achieving a goal. Richard–Amato (1996) suggests that the usefulness of music is very real and that music affects learning by removing the hurdles of mental restraint. The active use of music is said to open the mind and relax the listener making the learning process more comfortable and effective. Children seem to be very open to this concept. However, while this may be true for some children, it may not be true for all, and of course changes occur over time. From what we have uncovered thus far we can see there is a difference in the way children of differing ages learn best. So then where is that cut–off point, how can it be identified with any degree of accuracy, and what would be an adequate method by which to define this cut–off point? Richard–Amato says the style of music used in the classroom does make a difference in the willingness for students to participate. While music is beneficial, the returns diminish with age.

As for the content of study, there is a need for a universal and well understood subject to be used as a litmus test. Music–assisted math offers the potential to fulfill this criterion. Benati (2007) sums up one of our concerns very well. He states that listeners should have foreknowledge of the topics being taught in English so that they can think ahead and draw conclusions on their own and thus be compelled to speak out. Because math is universal it is more than suitable for repetition with or without music. Math is a subject that virtually all people are knowledgeable of at some level, giving the English learner a firm base to start with. Math is also one of the topics that seems to be set aside from other topics, such as food or animals, and is an area that is under–developed for most young English learners. This gives us a clean slate to work from in which we can easily identify progress and the speed at which language

is being learned. Benati's suggestion, that foundational knowledge of a topic assists in the acquisition of language, is an important factor to consider when selecting what is to be taught in the classroom.

Methodology

To survey educators, we went to a local English conversation school in western Japan that has been in operation for more than twenty years under the management of the original owner. The teaching method of this school relies heavily on music and jazz chants when educating all ages from infants to even the final years of elementary school. As the students get older, less of the music-based chants are presented in class and the educational experience moves towards deductive rather than inductive learning methods. However, each age range still studies the same learning materials, but in other ways. One of the requirements of this school is that all students learn math via the English language. Teachers have the option of presenting the math problems with music alone, music along with verbal practice, or purely as a verbal practice, depending on their inclination.

With regard to the seven educators who were participants of this study, we learned that each has an average of one year and seven months experience working at this particular English school as well as an average of three years total English teaching experience. Each educator teaches on average 4.4 *"Low"* Elementary (Grades 1-3) classes per week as well as 4.3 *"High"* Elementary (Grades 4-6) classes per week. None of the instructors surveyed were Japanese—all are foreign nationals living in Japan.

The survey, consisting of a short, personal data section, followed by seventeen questions related to age-appropriate learning and a final open opinion box

（please refer to Appendix I.）, was influenced by, and thus designed in accordance with insights on questionnaire creation presented by Dörnyei (2003). The questions consist of inquiries about many types of topics taught in English at the school as well as questions regarding math. Teachers were instructed to answer honestly and reassured that their survey details and names would never be made public. Teachers were also allowed to add comments about the survey and any additional topics they felt were relevant.

The survey was designed to show us if there is a shared conclusion among all of the teachers whether or not such an age–appropriateness exists while teaching with music as a primary aid, and also, what that age cut–off might be. It is intended that the insights acquired via analysis of this data would be compared with our own personal observations of the educational process in order to present changes or suggestions that can help optimize the classroom learning experience. The information collected from the participants was reviewed and the responses to each question tallied up. Then averages based on those results were calculated.

Findings

While the questionnaire included seventeen items as stated above, five were specifically designed to shed light on the topic of age appropriateness in regards to music–oriented English learning. Table 1 provides data drawn from the key questions asked in the survey that were answered by responses according to grade. Table 2 provides data drawn from the key questions asked in the survey that were answered by responses according to usage of materials.

We asked the teachers how much time they dedicated towards notebook and workbook usage in class. The data indicate there is a shift towards heavier

Table 1. Teachers' responses according to Grade (N=7).

Question	Gr. 1	Gr. 2	Gr. 3	Gr. 4	Gr. 5	Gr. 6	Never
Which grades seem to benefit a lot from singing with the teacher?	7	7	5	1	0	0	N/A
Do you feel students eventually out–grow singing along with the teacher? If so, at what grade?	0	0	1.5	2	5	5	0
Which grades do you feel benefit from singing math songs as opposed to simply reading the cards aloud?	6	5	4	1	1	1	1
Which grades in particular are enjoyable for you to teach?	6	6	5	2	3	3	N/A

Table 2. Teachers' responses according to usage of materials (N=7).

Question	Picture Dictionary	Math Songs	Dance English	Chants for Grammar	Other
Which songs do your students in Grades 1–3 really seem to like?	6	4	3	4	Comments given
Which songs do your students in Grades 4–6 really seem to like?	4	1	2	2	Comments given
Are there any songs that your students in Grades 1–3 seem unwilling to sing?	1	0	2	2	–
Are there any songs that your students in Grades 4–6 seem unwilling to sing?	0	5	4	2	–
What about "Kids?" Which songs to "Kids" class students seem to have trouble learning or singing?*	0	2	3	4	–
Which songs do elementary school students in Grades 1–3 seem to have trouble learning?	0	0	3	0	Comments given
Which songs do elementary school students in Grades 4–6 seem to have trouble learning?	0	0	1	1	Comments given

* "Kids" refers to pre–school classes

notebook and workbook usage as the children progress from Grades 1‑6. In Grade 1, students spend 5.4 minutes on average per class writing in notebooks and 10.7 minutes in workbooks. By Grade 6, students are spending on average 11.1 minutes in notebook work and 14.1 minutes in their workbooks. This may indicate that the children are moving from an inductive to deductive style of learning as metacognitive awareness increases. This seems to be something that teachers sense during their lessons and therefore adjust teaching plans accordingly.

Discussion

When we look at our question "Which grades seem to benefit a lot from singing with the teacher?," we see that all seven out of seven teachers polled agree that the 1st and 2nd grades benefit greatly from singing with the teacher as part of the lesson. Five out of seven teachers feel that song still has a place in the classroom while teaching 3rd grade students. However, by the 4th grade we notice a sharp drop‑off as only one teacher believes that music is still effective. This teacher stated in the comments section that it is the job of the teacher to make the music and learning enjoyable. This does show us that some place great emphasis on trying to make the most out of music‑oriented teaching and we can only surmise that this individual is willing to go out of his ∕her way to make learning fun. It is important to note that every teacher has a unique personality and while some teachers are more energetic than others, most agree that music becomes much less effective in its implementation by the 4th grade. All of the teachers agreed that the benefit of singing along with the teacher is no longer present by the 5th and 6th grade. Lightbown and Spada (1999) touch on the idea that there are in fact differences in the learn-

ing styles of differing age groups. The data support that idea and give us spe-
cific information, grade by grade, about the willingness of children living in
western Japan to participate in music–oriented learning. It would be interesting
to compare the findings of this study with language school situations in other
nations to see the effect that geographical location and culture has on the will-
ingness of these age ranges to sing aloud and with the teacher. Age is clearly a
factor when considering this form of teaching aid and the cut–off point of effec-
tiveness is fairly predictable.

The question, "Do you feel students eventually out–grow singing along
with the teacher? If so, at what grade?," is another way of looking at the idea
presented in the previous question. As indicated in Table 1, we see that by the
5th and 6th grades, students have, in the minds of the teachers, definitively
out–grown song in the classroom.

When we look at the 3rd question in Table 1, "Which grades do you feel
benefit from singing math songs as opposed to simply reading the cards
aloud?," we are really taking a look at math in the classroom. Again, we se-
lected math and singled it out from other subjects taught in English as it gives
the teacher the freedom to decide whether or not they would choose to use
the music and sing with the children or simply present the cards to be re-
peated in chorus. We see a steady decline in the desire to sing along with the
teacher starting from 1st grade till about 3rd grade. From Grades 4 to 6, we
see that only one teacher is still willing to use song in the classroom for the
purposes of learning mathematics in English.

This is a very important point to understand when selecting chants, songs
or other teaching devices to be added to a teaching curriculum. If teachers lean
toward using cards, songs or chants that can appeal to all age ranges depend-

ing on their usage, educators can save time and school funds as well as being more effective teachers. Knowing when to make that move away from music-oriented learning is critical.

The first two questions from Table 2 examine teachers' perceptions of students' attitudes towards various forms of song-based learning. Grades 1-3 are compared to Grades 4-6 in order to assess the viability of each teaching style. The activity known as *Picture Dictionary* seems to be universally accepted among all age ranges. For this activity students are led by music while they repeat vocabulary words as a form of inductive learning. The teacher presents one card at a time and the students repeat the word in sync with the steady rhythm-based background music. Dance English and Chants for Grammar teach students English phrases in the form of jazz chants or catchy tunes that students are asked to sing along with. Again, this is an inductive exercise and while results vary, we do not see a dramatic change between age ranges and willingness to participate.

Math Songs seem to break away from the norm, and while Grades 1-3 do not seem to have a problem singing math chants, Grades 4-6 show signs of a drastic change in willingness to sing. For Grades 1-3, math is an inductive process as the children simply sing along with the teacher. Math becomes a deductive practice for older students, who appear to have a desire to shout out an answer as opposed to simply following repetition. Singing Math Songs starve this deductive side that is becoming more and more a part of the nature of students in Grades 4-6, who are perhaps at the maturity level in which they are ready to move away from inductive learning towards deductive learning.

Age-appropriate learning is a very important aspect to understand as an educator. Age, not just English level, should be a factor by which we decide

how to group students together. All too often parents are eager to push their children into an older, higher level class because they feel their child is capable of so much more. There is a maturing process especially between 3rd and 4th graders. We cannot simply say because a child is smart that they should be moved up a grade level. For example, if a student in the 2nd grade is talented in English, there may be pressure (e.g. from parents) to place the child in a 4th grade classroom. However, the mental and social maturity of this bright student may not yet be developed to the point where he/she can fully participate in a class with older students. There is a difference in the attitude of a 2nd grader as opposed to a child in the 4th grade. If the same gifted student were to remain in his/her respective grade, we would probably not notice a lack of eagerness to participate and keep building English ability. When students are placed in a higher grade class, despite their young age, learning can be slowed and even stopped. The student in this situation may not get the full benefit of a higher level class and would be better off in a class they are happy with, that is of the right maturity level, and in a class that the student can excel in with confidence.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored information gathered from educators teaching at an English school in western Japan to uncover their perceptions of the attitudes children have towards music-oriented learning and how those attitudes are understood to change with age. Participants completed a survey designed to reveal their feelings towards the implementation of music-oriented teaching methods across all elementary grade levels. The data from this survey were compiled, analyzed and discussed in order to better understand how age

affects the willingness to participate in music–oriented learning. Methods of using this information to aid in productivity and efficiency were also presented.

The particular form of music–oriented teaching we focused our attention on was mathematics being taught in English. Since math ability involves a maturing process, where students begin with inductive memorization and progress toward deductive problem solving, we believed this fact would be reflected in students' attitudes toward math songs/chants for learning English. Since the songs used to teach math in English, even in higher elementary grades, remains inductive in nature, we were not surprised to uncover from the data that teachers noted a trend toward increasing ineffectiveness of Math Songs.

Aside from this, we offered insights into how children function while learning in their respective age ranges, and when placed in classes outside of that optimal range. A child's level of inter–personal and cognitive maturity is more related to age than English ability, which is why we have discussed the necessity of thinking more holistically about what is best for young English learners before automatically elevating them to classes with older students based solely on the criterion of English skill.

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Appendix I. Survey

Personal Data

How long have you been working at（*name of school*）?　　Years ___ Months ___

Total years of English teaching in Japan, including（*name of school*）: Years ___ Months ___

How many of the following classes do you teach?　"*Low*" Elementary（Grades　1～3）_____

"*High*" Elementary（Grades　4～6）_____

Please check the appropriate boxes–multiple selections are allowed.

Which grades seem to benefit a lot from singing along with the the teacher ?（e.g. chants, cards, etc.）

❏ 1st Grade	❏ 2nd Grade	❏ 3rd Grade	❏ 4th Grade	❏ 5th Grade	❏ 6th Grade

Do you feel students eventually out–grow singing along with the teacher? If so, at what grade? If not, check "Never"

❑ 1st Grade	❑ 2nd Grade	❑ 3rd Grade	❑ 4th Grade	❑ 5th Grade	❑ 6th Grade	❑ Never

Which grades do you feel benefit from singing math songs as opposed to simply reading the cards aloud?

❑ 1st Grade	❑ 2nd Grade	❑ 3rd Grade	❑ 4th Grade	❑ 5th Grade	❑ 6th Grade	❑ Never

Which grades in particular are enjoyable for you to teach ?

❑ 1st Grade	❑ 2nd Grade	❑ 3rd Grade	❑ 4th Grade	❑ 5th Grade	❑ 6th Grade	❑ None

Which songs do your students in Grades 1〜3 really seem to like?

❑ Picture Dictionary	❑ Math Songs	❑ Dance English	❑ Chants for Grammar	Other：

Which songs do your students in Grades 4〜6 really seem to like?

❑ Picture Dictionary	❑ Math Songs	❑ Dance English	❑ Chants for Grammar	Other：

Are there any songs that your students in Grades 1〜3 seem unwilling to sing?

❑ Picture Dictionary	❑ Math Songs	❑ Dance English	❑ Chants for Grammar	Other：

Are there any songs that your students in Grades 4〜6 seem unwilling to sing?

❑ Picture Dictionary	❑ Math Songs	❑ Dance English	❑ Chants for Grammar	Other：

Which songs do you personally **enjoy** using in the classroom?
Include the title(s). Leave blank if there are none.

1：	2：	3：

Are there any particular songs that you **don't like** singing in class? Include the title(s). Leave blank if there are none.

1：	2：	3：

What about *Kids*? Which songs do *Kids* class students seem to have trouble learning or singing?

❑ Picture Dictionary	❑ Math Songs	❑ Dance English	❑ Chants for Grammar	Other：

Which songs do *Elementary* students in Grades 1〜3 seem to have trouble learning?

❑ Picture Dictionary	❑ Math Songs	❑ Dance English	❑ Chants for Grammar	Other：

Which songs do *Elementary* students in Grades 4〜6 seem to have trouble learning?

❑ Picture Dictionary	❑ Math Songs	❑ Dance English	❑ Chants for Grammar	Other：

For the following, please check only one box per question.

Based on your observations and interactions in class, how often do you think the average student listens to the lesson CD at home?

❑ Everyday	❑ 5 times a week	❑ 3 times a week	❑ Once a week	❑ Never

In classes with a few students that are older than the rest, how often do the older students sing along?

❑ Always	❑ Almost always	❑ Sometimes	❑ Almost never	❑ Never

On average how many minutes per class do you spend having students write in the **notebook** for each grade?

1ˢᵗGrade___Min	2ⁿᵈGrade___Min	3ʳᵈGrade___Min	4ᵗʰGrade___Min	5ᵗʰGrade___Min	6ᵗʰGrade___Min

On average how many minutes per class do you spend having students write in the **workbook** for each grade ?
(e.g. "*Fox*," "*Bug*," "*Cow*," *etc.*)

1ˢᵗGrade___Min	2ⁿᵈGrade___Min	3ʳᵈGrade___Min	4ᵗʰGrade___Min	5ᵗʰGrade___Min	6ᵗʰGrade___Min

Thank you for taking the time to complete this form. We are sure that your help is what makes this study possible.

If you wish to add comments pertaining to any points highlighted in this survey, please do so in the space below :

Note : After completing this form, please put it in the self sealing envelope provided and place the envelope

in the secure box marked "*surveys*" located near the teacher's in-box.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us. (*e–mail address given*)