

Student Response to Singing in Speaking Class

Yukiko Yamami

1. Introduction

Many people enjoy singing songs. Singing can easily be incorporated into a second language learning classroom, and it often creates a vibrant change for students from the routine of learning an L2. For the teachers, using songs in the classroom can also be an active break from following a set curriculum. The author has been using songs every week in English speaking classes at university thinking that it is enjoyable and effective for learning. However, questions occurred whether singing in speaking classes is actually useful and beneficial for students. Does it only seem to be enjoyable or actually create effective learning to use songs in the classroom? Then the author decided to investigate the student response to singing in speaking class to find whether singing English songs is useful and effective for student language learning.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of using songs in English speaking class, to explore whether students themselves think learning through songs is enjoyable and effective, and to examine what changes if any may have happened to students after using songs in speaking class weekly. It then recommends singing English songs in speaking class, especially for begin-

ner and intermediate level classes, to motivate them to study, and to further good pronunciation, vocabulary, and rhythm.

2. Literature review

Ludke et al. (2014) investigated whether singing can support adults' beginning-level L2 learning compared to practicing it through more traditional, speech-based instructional methods. The results indicated that singing phrases, rather than speaking them, can make learning a second language easier. Further they claimed that learning a second language through musical activities increased teenage students' confidence to speak it, and the students reported that the songs they practiced in class repeated in their heads even after class. Jolly (1975) stated that teachers may be missing a great deal by not exploiting songs as classroom teaching aids, and that language and music have commonalities that address the communication aspects of language. Yamami (2013) reported songs are not only enjoyable but also useful to acquire L2 language. Because learning takes place by meaningful repetition of the learning terms, giving meaningful repetition is necessary. Songs provide much meaningful repetition without losing the learners' interest, and they help students to acquire sounds, rhythm and stress, formulas, syntactical items, and vocabulary (Richard, 1969).

On the other hand, there are many studies which show significant differences in sounds between English and Japanese languages. Ohata (2004) stated that differences in vowels, consonants and syllable types between English and Japanese languages cause obstacles for Japanese to learn English. In addition, Riken (2010) compared 14 month-old French and Japanese babies to investigate how they hear sounds, and found that the latter already acquired their language phonological system and inserted illusory vowels between consonant clusters while listening the consonant continuum. The study concluded that it is caused by the substantial differences in phonological systems between English and

Japanese languages. Further, Kuhl et al. (2001) stated that babies are taking ‘statistics’ regarding what sounds are used and spoken while they are listening to their mothers. They claimed that because there are hardly no English /r/, /l/ sounds in Japanese and the Japanese /r/ is very different from the English /r/, /l/, Japanese babies absorb Japanese /r/ sounds and discard English /r/, /l/ sounds, which is a part of statistics babies take. Babies change their brains applying ‘statistics’ to them.

Jenkins (2000) stated that important areas for the phonology of English as an international language are most consonant sounds, appropriate consonant cluster simplification, vowel length distinctions, and nuclear stress. In order to acquire English as an international language, Japanese need to learn these features despite significant differences between Japanese and English. Moriya (1988) claimed that using songs for pronunciation practice with Asian learners of English has value due to the phonemic differences between Asian languages and English. In addition, Shen (2009) investigated college classes in China and found that students who always listen to English songs pay more attention to pronunciation, phonological rules, stress and intonation than others, and thus they pronounce English more correctly and speak it more fluently.

3. Method

3.1 Subjects

18 intermediate (IM) second year students and 12 advanced (AD) second year students, 30 students in total, in university speaking classes participated in this study. They are majoring in international business. Students were given certain English tests instructed by university administrations in advance and then take classes based on their English test score results.

3.2 Class contents

The classes take place once a week for 90 minutes, 15 times per semester and are conducted by a Japanese English instructor (the author) entirely in English. The classes include singing a new song every week at the beginning of each class. Songs were chosen by the author and shown to students on the first day of class (Appendix 1).

Pronunciation practice for words from the lyrics of the songs using phonetic symbols were instructed before singing every week. Students were given explicit instructions on how to produce the sounds. For example, before singing a song of *A Whole New World*, the explicit explanation on how to pronounce [ʃ] with rounded lips and fricative sounds was explained. Then words from lyrics containing [ʃ], such as show, shinning, shimmering, shooting, were written on board and students practiced their pronunciation. Vocabulary items of the song were also explained and practiced before singing. Lyrics of the song were handed out to students every week, and they were encouraged to look at them to acquire vocabulary items, spelling and its sound connection, and the meaning of the lyrics. Then songs were played using You Tube in classroom two times; first they listened to it while looking at the lyrics, and second they sang along.

3.3 Questionnaire

Students were asked to answer agree, neither agree or disagree, and disagree, to following statements; 1. I feel motivated to study English by singing songs in speaking class weekly. 2. I look forward to coming to speaking class because of singing song time in class. 3. I noticed some changes in my English since I started singing weekly in speaking class. 4. Regarding question 3, how and what changed about your English if anything. A questionnaire consisting of the four statements above was given to the students at the end of 6th week during speaking classes.

4. Results

To the statement I feel motivated to study English by singing songs in speaking class weekly, 83% of IM students and 67% of AD students agreed. While a majority of 83% of IM students felt motivated to study English by singing songs, 17% of students answered neither agree nor disagree and none of them disagreed. As for AD students, while 67% of students felt motivated to study English by singing songs in speaking class, 25% of them neither agreed nor disagreed and 8% of them disagreed.

To the statement I look forward to coming to speaking class because of singing song time in class, while 56% of IM students agreed, 44% of them neither agreed nor disagreed and none of them disagreed. 67% of AD students agreed to the statement, whereas 25% of them neither agreed nor disagreed, and 8% of them disagreed.

To the statement I noticed some changes in my English since I started singing weekly in speaking class, 67% of IM students agreed, and 33% of them neither agreed nor disagreed and none of them disagreed. On the other hand, only 42% of AD students agreed, and 50% neither agreed nor disagreed and 8% disagreed.

To the statement how and what changed about your English if anything, IM students stated as follows (All students except one answered in Japanese, and they were translated by the author):

- I became to try to understand the meaning of the lyrics.
- I became to pay more attention to natural expressions.
- I think my pronunciation got better.
- I noticed the differences in English and Japanese sounds that had seemed similar.
- I gained many vocabulary items through songs.
- I became to pay more attention to the emotion that the lyrics of the songs had.

- Because the singers' pronunciation is good, I thought I want to imitate them.
- I think my pronunciation became better.
- Pronunciation !!

AD students stated as follows:

- My listening skill improved.
- I acquired a rhythm of English through singing.
- I really do not care.

5. Data analysis

While 83% of IM students felt motivated to study English by singing songs in speaking class weekly, 67% of AD students agreed with the statement. The fact that more IM students felt motivated to study English by singing than AD students corresponds to the study (Ludke et al, 2014) stating that singing facilitates L2 learning for beginning level adults. It is presumable that singing in speaking class is more effective for beginning and intermediate level students than for advanced level students. Furthermore, while as many as 67% of IM students noticed some changes in their English since they started singing weekly in speaking class, only 25% of AD students did. It may also support that singing is more beneficial for beginning and intermediate level students.

On the other hand, only 56% of IM students looked forward to coming to speaking class because of singing song time in class. 56% is lower than 67% for AD students, and it may be necessary to contemplate the reason for that. IM students seemed less motivated to attend classes or to study English at the beginning of the semester. Therefore, it may be essential for them to find motivation to attend class and to study English. In order to do that, incorporating songs into speaking class may be effective because as many as 83% of IM students stated that they feel motivated to study English by singing in speaking class weekly. Since this data describes the results of the 6th week (students

had attended speaking class six times), the results at the end of semester (15th week, after students attend speaking class 15 times) would have been different. Therefore, further research is effective to explore whether to continue incorporating songs in speaking class motivates IM students more to attend the class and study English.

On the other hand, 5 students out of 12 students who noticed some changes through singing described something related to pronunciation such as that their pronunciation became better. It is remarkably high and notable. As Moriya (1998) stated that using songs for pronunciation practice with Asian learners of English has value due to the phonemic differences between Asian languages and English, singing songs helped students feel they improve their pronunciation in this study. Further research using their recorded data and acoustic analyses would be effective to investigate whether their English pronunciation actually improves after attending speaking classes using songs for a certain period of time.

Some students stated they learned new vocabulary items through songs, became to comprehend the meaning of the lyrics of the songs, and acquired English rhythm. It is apparent that singing English songs is effective to learn not only pronunciation but also vocabulary, rhythm, and intonation.

6. Conclusion

Singing in speaking classes weekly can be effective to motivate students to study English. This study shows that it is more beneficial to use singing for beginning and intermediate level students. Therefore, it is highly recommended to incorporate singing into speaking classrooms, especially for beginning and intermediate level students. As some of the students stated, singing songs can help them improve their pronunciation, and presumably intonation and rhythm. Because phonemic differences between Japanese and English are significant, it

is necessary to listen to English repeatedly for Japanese to acquire the sounds of English. Singing songs provides opportunities to listen to them repeatedly with an important caveat. One study claims that because the Japanese and English languages have very different phonological systems, implicit exposure to English does not enable Japanese students to distinguish English sounds, and explicit explanation regarding letters and their sounds is necessary (Oiwa and Akatsuka, 2011). Therefore, explicit instruction on how to shape the lips, to place the tongue and to use air is necessary to improve English pronunciation. Singing in speaking class in this study included explicit pronunciation practice using words in lyrics of the songs and their phonemic symbols, which may have lead students to state that they noticed some changes in their pronunciation. Songs also include many vocabulary items. Singing English songs is not only enjoyable but also effective to acquire sounds, rhythm and stress, formulas, syntactical items, and vocabulary. Therefore, incorporating singing into the English classroom is recommended, and developing teaching materials with songs including explicit pronunciation instruction such as pictures of the mouth that illustrate how to pronounce the sounds, and phonetic alphabet, is in high demand.

References

- Jenkins, J. (2000) *The phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford university press.
- Jolly, Y.S. (1975) The use of songs in teaching foreign languages. *The Modern Language Journal*, 59 (1/2).
- Kuhl, K.P., Gopnik, A., and Meltzoff, A.N. (2001) *The Scientist in the Crib: what early learning tells us about the mind*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Ludke, K.M., Ferreira, F., and Overy, K. (2014) Singing can facilitate foreign language learning. *Memory & Cognition*. 42. 41-52.
- Moriya, Y. (1988) English speech rhythm and its teaching to non-native speakers. Paper pre-

- sented at the annual convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Chicago.
- Ohata, K. (2004) Phonological differences between Japanese and English: Several potentially problematic areas of pronunciation for Japanese ESL/EFL learners. *Asian EFL Journal*, 6 (4).
- Richards, J. (1969) Songs in language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 3(2).
- Shen, C. (2009) Using English songs: An enjoyable and effective approach to ELT. *English Language Teaching*, 2(1).
- Yamami, Y. (2013) Oyako Eigo: An English Program for Parents and Children. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.
- 大岩晶子・赤塚麻里 (2011)「初等教育における新しい機器を利用した英語教育研究—3年間の実績と追跡調査を中心に(研究経過報告1)」『英語音声学』日本英語音声学会理化学研究所(2010)外国語に母音を挿入して聞く「日本語耳」は生後14か月から獲得—日本人乳幼児とフランス人乳幼児の子音連続の知覚は発達で変わる—<http://www.riken.jp/pr/press/2010/20101012/>

Appendix 1

Songs for this semester:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Country roads (John Denver) | 9. A whole new world (from the movie Aladdin) |
| 2. You belong with me (Taylor Swift) | 10. Sugar (Maroon 5) |
| 3. Live while we're young (One Direction) | 11. Let it be (The Beatles) |
| 4. Call me maybe (Carly Rae Jepsen) | 12. I just called to say I love you (Stevie Wonder) |
| 5. Love story (Taylor Swift) | 13. I don't want to miss a thing (Aerosmith) |
| 6. My heart will go on (Celine Dion) | 14. Stand by me (Ben E. King) |
| 7. Top of the world (The Carpenters) | 15. Keep holding on (Avril Lavigne) |
| 8. What makes you beautiful (One Direction) | |