

ADDING MUSIC TO POETRY

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This article proposes the combination of music with poetry as one way of enhancing language learning. At first this may sound challenging to the poetry purist since poetry undoubtedly has its own rhythms, melodies and general musical architecture. However, after a careful selection of poem and genre and a wide exploration of musical possibilities, classroom results have been so encouraging that the message seems worth sharing with others. Voicing a written text means reading it aloud in an expressive way. If we add an appropriate background music to, for instance, poetry reading, the poem becomes a dynamic sounding entity. This oral literary version of the poem resembles the soundtrack of films where instrumental music is used to increase dramatic effects.

It is not always easy to find the appropriate musical piece that suits a poem. Matching musical and verbal input is not a simple task, so intuition is our main tool. It is a student-centered activity where all students have the opportunity to participate, no matter what their level of linguistic ability is. When the teacher uses a musical piece to present a poem, s/he is providing students with additional information to deduce the pragmatic situation we are in, that is to say, the context of what is being said. As another type of guided classroom activity, teachers can present a selection of musical fragments for students to decide the one that best matches the poem. As a free activity, students read the target language poem at home and choose the background music they would use to recite or read the poem aloud¹. This means that students have to spend a certain amount of time only listening to instrumental music and rereading the poem with the music.

The use of this melodic input pursues pedagogical aims such as offering learners a holistic approach to language learning, an aesthetic connection to listening or reading and a way to experience language that takes advantage of the emotional elements given by music.

- **Holistic language learning**

When the FL teacher uses music at the presentation stage and intonates the poet's feelings, when s/he focuses on rhythm and speech melody, s/he is helping FL students to take the poem as a whole and also to activate their auditory patterns to find as much information as possible in their memories. The students instead of focusing on analytical elements of language such as the isolated words they don't know or the different types of structures used in the poem, are given the opportunity to feel what the poem is about.

Quast describes the effect of music 'as a means of promoting storage processes...proceeding from the assumption that the left hemisphere preferably

¹ Another possibility is that of offering a musical piece and a selection of poems. Students have to agree in groups which of the poems suits that music. Jane Arnold has suggested a variant for more advanced students; as they have access to poetry anthologies, they can select both poem and music.

processes verbal stimuli, the global activity of both hemispheres is supported by the simultaneous use of language and music...The music also intensifies the flow of assimilation in the hearer. Items of information are processed with multiple interconnections in memory resulting in a better recall of data.' (1995:13).

All this oral information gives students clues for the global understanding of the text as it is the phonological information the first one the hearer perceives and processes to decode any oral verbal message.

A similar mental process happens during a phone call. From a person's speech melody we are capable of deducing the mood s/he is in. From any background sound we hear at that moment, we can infer other type of non-verbal information such as, for example, the place where the speaker is.

- **Aesthetic Listening or Reading**

In the Ancient World, music and poetry were part of the same concept, that of *ars musica*. Poetry and music have an emotional communicative value. They also share some basic components such as rhythm, pauses and melody, and both exist to be experienced and enjoyed. The pleasure of hearing or reading works created by others increases when the receiver of this type of message interacts and brings his/her own experience to the piece. In fact, the epic poems were to be sung as this technique helped the speaker to concentrate and remember the lines, and, at the same time, it was a way for him to direct the audience's attention. Lyrical poems have also been adapted by composers and have become the lyrics of modern songs.

In the case of the melodic sensitizing activity that we are describing, the musical background has a direct effect on the reader's use of tempo in his/her reading speed. When tuning our voice to music, we instinctively respect pauses, slow down our speech production and follow the pitch variations proposed by the music. It is not possible to read a text aloud in this way without connecting words, without grouping them in rhythmic phrases. It is this rhythmic articulation that gives the learners the opportunity of feeling the pleasure of expressing themselves fluently in the target language.

- **Experiencing language**

Arnold points out '...we learn better that which attracts our attention, and emotion automatically makes us pay attention' (1999: 260). This is what music does in the activity described. It is not only about matching prosodic verbal elements with musical stimuli because this has mainly to do with the external sounding level; in order to promote language acquisition it is also necessary to reach the meaning level. A universal example can be the central tune of the film *Ghost* which will help us to understand the passion Shakespeare expressed in one of his love sonnets. An appropriate background music as part of the 'stage setting' gives students the opportunity of experiencing the poet's sentiments.

The instrumental music used in this type of activity to accompany the reading can have an effect of creating mental images in our students' minds. These pictures in the mind will be 'a result of the interaction between what we have in storage and what is going on at that moment' (Stevick 1986: 16). The well-known tune of the *Happy*

Birthday song brings quite quickly into our minds the picture of celebrating with our relatives or friends, while Vivaldi's *Four seasons* places us mentally in a nature setting and Celtic music reminds us of Scotland, Ireland, the North of Spain or France.

Obviously we have only described one example of the use of poems as authentic material in the classroom. We are aware that many other logical-analytical activities are necessary to promote language acquisition. Our main purpose has been to show that language is something more than knowing how to combine words and sentences; it is not only a discipline, but a gift (Iotti 1998). Perhaps this activity based on an intuitive matching of music and language can help learners to experience, what we teachers also need to feel, the pleasure of *ars musica* and the pleasure of reproducing language properly.

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