


English Learners in the Elementary Music Classroom



By Julissa Y. Chapa

When I walked into music class for the first time over 30 years ago, I did not speak English. I followed my peers into a colorful classroom and watched hesitantly as my homeroom teacher left and a new, unfamiliar teacher began to sing. I secretly loved music, but I couldn't communicate with my teacher. She couldn't understand me, and I didn't know how to sing her songs. I simply sat down, observed, and imitated.

In Texas we now have many specialized programs for English Learners (ELs), including English as a Second Language (ESL), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Limited English Proficiency (LEP), Dual Language (DL), and Bilingual Education. Still, when students walk into music class, their experiences often mirror mine. Most music educators today are white monolingual English speakers (Elpus, 2015), and they rarely receive training on how to teach ELs in the music classroom. While we cannot control what languages our students speak, we can control how we help them. So, what can we do to support our ELs?

Focusing on How We Teach

The first step is to acknowledge that ELs are a unique group whose needs should guide our teaching. ELs experience music learning differently from other students in the same community and school. It is important to find out about these learners' attitudes toward music class and the degree to which language barriers hinder their enjoyment of music in class. Many teachers feel overwhelmed, thinking they may need to become multilingual and change what they teach. In reality, it should change *how* we teach. For example, my students are largely Spanish-speaking ELs, and I am fluent in Spanish, but the stipulations of my school's bilingual and dual-language programs specify I teach music vocabulary and concept development in English. So instead of teaching my core music content in Spanish, I supplement my lessons with strate-

gies that help minimize hurdles with language development and help my students with their musical and creative development. Consider the following practical strategies when teaching ELs:

Sing in Their Native Language

One of the most important things we can do to help ELs is to sing in their native language. Language and music are both intricate processes that require concentration, retention, and motor abilities (Besson, 2011). Singing in a native language eliminates one of the two complex items, allowing the singer to focus on the task of singing rather than processing language. As an elementary teacher, I would rather my students pronounce all the words in a song incorrectly but sing the melody perfectly in tune. For many students, words command their immediate attention so they may opt to concentrate on them rather than focus on singing correct pitches, singing in the correct octave, or utilizing their head voice. It takes time to find authentic repertoire for the languages represented in our classrooms, but if students can shift their attention from their language limitations to their musical abilities, the time will prove to be well-spent.

Restructure the Rote Process

Many teachers have a collection of singing games in English that are excellent for concept development. To help expose students to songs in English with an increased chance for success, consider adapting the long-established rote process when teaching new repertoire to ELs. Teachers should provide students with song translations in their language, especially words important to the narrative of the song. Song visuals can also help students give songs meaning. Remember, if words have no meaning, there is no point of reference for sentence structure or word context. Students would simply echo random nonsense syllables and try to memorize their order, limiting their ability to internalize a song

and its musical elements. To achieve comprehension, teachers may have to separate language from the melody so students can process each individually. The new process would add steps to the routine and look like this:

1. Sing the entire song for students.
2. Break up the words and offer a translation, using words or visuals.
3. Teach the song by rote as a chant first.
4. Teach the melody separately by rote on neutral syllables.
5. Follow the process as you would with any song.

Rethink the Repertoire

To select repertoire that will help students' language development, teachers can learn some of the nuances of their students' native language. Languages have different qualities that make them look and sound unique. For example, Spanish has only five pure vowels, five diphthongs, and no contractions. There are several consonant blends in English that do not exist in Spanish (*sh, th, sl, sm, scr, spr, str, sk, wr, -ps, -ts*). These will be new sounds to a Spanish-speaking EL. While we cannot altogether avoid all language differences, a song with too many unknown elements will be difficult for young students to pronounce. Additionally, archaic language, tongue twisters, and songs with excessive words or quick tempi may further create linguistic hurdles for students. These hurdles increase their discomfort in singing and therefore limit a song's pedagogical function.

It may be tempting to just translate songs to simplify repertoire we already know, use, and love. Unfortunately, we cannot force songs into another language's

syntax. Spanish is a syllable-timed language; English is a stress-timed language. Sometimes translations are successful, but more often they sound coerced and rob the song of the natural rhythm flow of its original language. Instead, search for songs in any language that may be easier to pronounce for your ELs based on their native language.

Consider Language Development

When sequencing material for students, teachers must realize that students go through Stages of Second Language Acquisition (Krashen and Terrel, 1983). During the first stage, *Pre-production*, children may be unable or apprehensive to communicate verbally, especially if the teacher is a monolingual English-speaker. Students may not talk but will use body language, so it is imperative to pay attention to their actions and read their facial expressions. Many students in my pre-kindergarten and kindergarten bilingual classes are in this stage because this is their first experience outside their homes, where they speak only in their native language.

During this silent stage, teachers modeling singing and language is crucial. Therefore, I do not expect or require these students to sing complete songs. If they are hesitant to speak, how much more hesitant will they be to sing? I do not forbid students from singing; I simply allow them to abstain. I concentrate the first months of instruction on repertoire with vocal exploration, sound responses, syllabic tonal patterns, nonsense syllables, and pitch experimentation. I also include action songs in both Spanish and English so children can begin to build up the movement vocabulary used throughout the elementary years.

During the *Early Production* stage, students are comfortable using several key words. For classes with students in this stage, I sing songs with short phrases and utilize song books as visual aids. Later, students can comfortably produce simple sentences during the *Speech Emergence* stage. I then include many songs with echoes and sections of call and response. This allows students to freely develop their singing voices through imitation and repetition. Students in the final two stages, *Intermediate Fluency* and *Advanced*



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Fluency, are conversationally fluent and usually require only minor modifications in teaching. Still, I continue to make connections between languages through songs with common topics. My older students are often in the later stages of language development simply because they have participated in the ESL program for a longer period of time. Nonetheless, an influx of new monolingual ELs or recent immigrants in the class can change the linguistic dynamic. In those cases, I make further modifications to my teaching.

The Stages of Second Language Acquisition can be used to guide our lessons, but all schools, classes, students, and teachers are different. Depending on various factors inside and outside the school setting, students in one classroom or in the same grade level could be at different stages at any given moment, so it is important to know your students. As we get to know them, we can begin to adapt instruction for individual students as necessary. Admittedly, it is not our job to teach English language concepts, nor are

we necessarily qualified to do so. However, it is our responsibility to ensure our students are learning to be musical, which sometimes entails more than simply teaching music.

Taking the First Steps

There are always variations and exceptions to these strategies and how they work in every classroom. Remember, you do not have to change your entire repertoire and yearly plan. Inject these strategies into lessons as you become more comfortable and learn which songs and activities work better for your journey. Often, fear of misrepresenting a language or culture can make teachers hesitant to venture outside the known. I recommend teachers respectfully research music and culture to include music outside the Western canon in their programs as authentically as possible—be bold enough to try. As a starting point, learn songs from students and start a multilingual song collection using their input. Be genuine in your presentation and in your sincerity of purpose. ELs will understand how uncomfortable it feels to speak and sing in a different language and will extend grace because they endure that feeling every day. Ultimately, your students will remember and appreciate your efforts to demonstrate they deserve a place and voice in your classroom and in the field of music.



Julissa Y. Chapa is an elementary music specialist at Garfield Elementary in Pasadena ISD.

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