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Finding their Voice: Singing and Teaching with Refugees in Australia

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Finding their Voice: Singing and Teaching with Refugees in Australia

I love to sing with my students. Trained as a music and language teacher, I've maintained a keen interest in the relationship between language skill development and singing for many years. But what is it about singing that complements language teaching so well?

Research into the relationship between music and language is fascinating and diverse. Studies in neuroscience, second language acquisition, music therapy and literacy development all show that music, and in particular singing with words, connects brain networks and has a positive effect on language learning (Jeffries, Fritz & Braun, 2003; Overy, 2006; Schlaug, 2015). Add to this the research on the social and emotional benefits of singing, especially group singing (de Jong, 2013; Wilson, Abbott, Lusher, Gentle, & Jackson, 2011), and there is little doubt that working with song and music in our ESL and EFL classes can be a rewarding experience for all involved.

If you do have any lingering doubts about the benefits of singing with your students, watch singer and motivational speaker (just two of her many roles and talents) Tania de Jong's inspiring [TED talk](#) on how singing together changes the brain. It is the introductory video for this issue. We all have a voice, Tania reminds us. Singing together can help us find our *singing* voice, and our voice in life (de Jong, 2013).



When we sing, scans have revealed different networks in the brain which are engaged. Motor, auditory, memory, planning and organization, language and emotional networks all light up in these scans, even when we are *thinking* about singing (Wilson, 2013). Reward networks are activated and dopamine is released in the brain (Jeffries et al., 2003; Wilson, 2013). Singing makes us feel good, and when we sing together, some studies even show that the breathing and heartbeat patterns of those singing start to synchronise (Müller & Lindberger, 2011).

Singing plays a part in social cohesion, motivation and group identity (Wilson et al., 2011). Some research suggests that the “preservation of actual words is higher in

singing than in storytelling” (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 2116). Such benefits are not a new thought for those in oral cultures which have long valued singing and music as a means of preserving identity, faith, culture and history. In the Yazidi community from Iraq and Syria for example, words have been preserved for centuries through hymns (called “qawls”) that are passed down to each generation through singing (Allison, 2004). I have the privilege of teaching English to adult refugees from this community. Kurmanji (the Kurdish dialect spoken by most of the students I teach) is not widely taught in its written form, due to political restrictions in certain regions, and students have had few opportunities for formal education. As a result, most have not yet learned to read but have developed strong oral learning skills.



I began to search for ways to teach my students English by connecting their oral skills to emerging skills in literacy. Literate teachers, educated in cultures which prioritise written forms of communicating and recording information can find it challenging to adopt new ways of teaching that emphasise a *non-literacy*-based form of learning. As Keller (2017, p. 2) notes: “many literates...find it hard to accept that an emphasis on literacy is not always shared by other cultures”. This was the place I found myself in when I started working with pre-literate adult refugee English learners. So I started to adapt my teaching style to one which prioritised oral learning skills. I am now discovering that singing is more than an enjoyable social experience for my students. It’s also an important language teaching tool. Singing is a way of presenting content orally, and can form a bridge to future English literacy development (Keller, 2017; Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010).

There are several ways I incorporate singing into my lessons. With smaller groups of students at a refugee support centre where I volunteer, we usually start lessons by singing a short song together. Sometimes I create songs to suit a theme; other times I find songs from, for example Carmel Davies' and Sharon Duff's [Sing With Me](#) series. With beginners, a whole song may be too much to work with. I adapt songs, repeat certain sections or just teach one section of a song at a time. I learned early on that my "music teacher" ideas of what rhythmic and melodic structure is necessary in a song don't necessarily work in the language learning contexts I teach in now. Complex, musically well-formed phrases in traditional Western verse-chorus forms aren't always what's needed. Simple repetition of a melodic phrase can work well, even if it seems to me that it's "not going anywhere" musically. It needs to be enough to hook the language onto, and it needs to be planned and led just like any other teaching activity.

Singing together can help us find our singing voice, and our voice in life.

As part of the lesson, I sing in a call-and-response style with questions and answers in English. Individual students sing back a response to my sung question. I might introduce a simple sentence in a repetitive, sing-song style. We sit around a table in these lessons, where the

learners are mostly mothers who have limited opportunities to learn and practice English while they're caring for their young children at home. They may have lived here for several years, but speaking fluently in English is still a challenge. I find, however that combining sentences with a simple melodic phrase promotes fluency. Students can sing the words more fluently than they can speak them. This has been noted in research which suggests that activating certain regions of the brain through singing can support "fluency-inducing effects of words produced in melody" (Jeffries et al., 2003, p. 754).

Singing with a large group of young adult refugee-background students is a real highlight in my week! We have around 70 young people across a few classes in the adult migrant English program where I live. Two other teachers and I have collaborated to include a group singing time with the combined classes each week. A local musician in the community, [Josh Arnold](#) has written and recorded songs with our students in the past. The lyrics in these songs are simple and reflect the feelings and aspirations of the students in our courses. They know the previous students who were part of the song-writing process with Josh, so the



motivation to understand, learn and sing the lyrics is understandably high: these are *their* songs.

As well as providing us with a time to experience all the benefits of shared singing, group singing has given students an opportunity to work on features of English pronunciation. We generally begin with a warm up exercise. There are a number of simple vocal warm ups and breathing exercises that can be used and I have students follow the rise and fall of my hand to become more aware of their sound as a group.



Rhythmic awareness is also important. Although extemporaneous or unrehearsed speech doesn't mark out a regular pulse, how we hear the prosodic features (rhythm, stress and rising or falling tones) of a language is influenced by our first language (Patel, 2010). As "people from different language backgrounds hear prosody quite differently" (Fraser, 2001, p. 30), it can be helpful for students to physically engage with English rhythm through body movement (Celce-Murcia, 2010). Stress often comes on the last syllable of a word in Kurdish (Rahimpour & Dovaise, 2011), so it can be difficult for these learners to hear and feel stress on initial syllables in English. We sway and tap or clap to the beat of the song, then begin to say phrases or chunks of the lyrics as they fit to these beats. One group can practise chanting these words while the other group sways to the beat.

I find that using Acton's (Acton, Baker, Burri, & Teaman, 2013) pedagogical movement patterns for specific vowels on the main stressed syllables of English words in song phrases can help students remember these sounds, linking the sounds with a visual and tactile cue. Using my hand to gesture also helps students become aware of the rise and fall of the melody in a song as I'm singing with them. Gesturing

for a particular word without singing the note can remind students of the pitch of a note and its associated word.

As a final note (I couldn't resist just one musical pun!): it is rewarding for teachers who work with refugees to watch their students grow more confident as language learners and "take risks with English" (Adoniou & Macken-Horarik, 2007, p. 13). I have seen women who can only say a few words of English give up on some classroom activities. They disparagingly wave their hands and say: "No English." But I've never seen this reaction when we sing in English. They don't give up when they're singing, which is why I love to sing with adult refugee students in my classes.

Skye Playsted is a teacher who studied ethnomusicology, cello and German. She taught German and music for 20 years and has always enjoyed singing and playing music with others. She now has a Graduate Certificate in TESOL and teaches English in a government-funded adult migrant English program in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia. Skye is completing her M Ed via distance education through the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia.

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Are artists different from the rest of us? [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#), author of *Flow*, thinks so. Take a look at this fascinating [article](#) he wrote. And [this piece](#) by Epstein from the same issue, on how to increase creativity, is also a good read.

This month's contributors, does Mihaly's article ring a bell? Tell us on Facebook!

