

**A reflection on the use of songs  
in the teaching of English as a  
foreign language to young  
learners**

**Marie Ray-Trotter**

## **Introduction:**

The Gambia is the smallest nation in mainland Africa, situated in the western portion, geographically surrounded by Senegal, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). The incidence of poverty is extremely high in The Gambia, and its increasing population, estimated to be over 1.9 million (The World Bank, 2018) puts immense strain on the country's social and economic resources. The 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Gambia recognised education as a fundamental human right, and as a result, in 2009, the Government of The Gambia implemented the 'National ECD Policy Framework (2009–2015)' in an attempt to intensify multisectoral efforts to meet the requirements of all children under eight years old (SABER Country Report, 2013). More recently, there has been significant emphasis put upon increasing these educational provisions in order to achieve meaningful gains and improvements. These implemented strategies have been perceived as a governmental attempt to alleviate the effects of poverty and disadvantage by ensuring that the upcoming generations are well-educated and able to enter confidently into international, competitive job markets.

In the summer of 2018, I visited The Gambia, where I volunteered in an early years setting in the town of Serekunda; the experience as a whole was hugely enriching, and I was given the opportunity to be exposed to more diverse pedagogical approaches to educating young children in an entirely new cultural context.

Upon starting my placement in the setting, I was essentially 'thrown into the deep end', given a class of 63 students aged between 3 and 6 years old, many of whom were not proficient in the English language.

As a result, I had to devise a way in which to educate the children which would be stimulating and exciting enough to encourage their active participation in class, but also which implemented areas of curricular topics. Resources were extremely limited, so, in an imaginative way, I chose to use the medium of music; specifically, songs and nursery-rhymes. Therefore, with reference made to wider reflective practice literature which has shaped my deepened understanding, I thus reflect and explore upon my own personal experience in the Gambia, with particular focus upon how the use of these tools facilitated me in my methods of teaching.

### **Reflective Practice Literature and definitions:**

Reflection has been generically defined as a “meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas” (Rogers, 2002, pg.845). Furthermore, as a process, McGregor & Cartwright (2011) highlight the opportunities given by reflection in supporting individuals to understand the significance of specific experiences by elaborating upon the “explicit factors which facilitated a positive experience” (2011, pg.62). A multitude of different benefits have been accredited to reflection, including its ability to help individuals to extend their emotional tolerances through avoiding narrow interpretations; in thinking beyond direct observation and considering more profound meanings and attitudes, experiences can be brought into focus and replayed from more diverse points of view (Bolton, 2010).

Educational philosopher John Dewey considered the intricate relationship between experiences and education, suggesting that “all genuine education comes about through experience...but that does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative (1938, pg.25).

In acknowledging this, he concluded that experiences alone are not sufficient enough without their significances being thoroughly understood through reflection, which itself, is truly educative in value (1938). Dewey further expressed that due to the fact all experiences build on preceding ones, they should therefore be directed to the complete ends of growth and development along an 'experiential continuum' (1938, pg.33). This principle was elaborated upon by Kolb (1984), who proposed a cycle in which experiential learning can be achieved. This cycle is made up of four stages, titled 'concrete experience', 'reflective observation', 'abstract conceptualization', and finally, 'active experimentation' (Dixon, 1999, pg.40). Kolb's experiential learning cycle can be related back to Piagetian sequences of developmental stages which are underpinned by the processes of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1971). In both schemas, the intake of information from environmental interactions and the modification of gained knowledges contribute to new learning experiences which, in turn, can be critically reflected upon and utilised to benefit future situations.

Despite the fact that Kolb's proposed experiential learning cycle is effective in locating a sequence of activities of learning from various experiences, it has been somewhat criticised for a number of reasons. One limitation voiced by Bassot (2016) highlighted the fact that different people learn in different ways, using different styles, so, the model cannot be applied universally. Furthermore, the model has been critiqued for its general simplicity and disregard for external cultural or contextual variables.

As Forrest (2004) explains, "the idea of a nice set of neat learning stages does not equate to most people's reality; a number of processes can occur at once and stages can be jumped or missed out completely" (2005, pg.5).

For this reason, although I acknowledged Kolb's cycle during my personal reflections, I chose to focus more on Gibb's reflective cycle which incorporates a more emotional dimension, providing an outline for 'structured de-briefing' (Gibbs, 1988, pg.46). Considering my own personal thoughts and feelings in this more explicit way thus advocates the notion that reflection is not merely an intellectual process, but rather, one that is equally concerned with emotions (Boud & Walker, 1998).

During my time spent in The Gambia, I kept a reflective diary in which every day, I described outlines of the day's activities, specifically, those of particular resonance, descriptions of the classroom environment I was teaching in, and accounts of my thoughts, feelings and emotions. Stevens & Cooper (2009) promote the use of reflective journals as a central means of the pursuit towards a more thoughtful life; they agree that "the journal is concrete evidence of one's evolving thought processes, documenting valuable, often fleeting glimpses of understanding (2009, pg.3). Similarly, Bassot (2016) explains how investing time to write reflectively in a journal can help link ideas and understandings together, expanding upon, and deepening them as we query our approaches to people and circumstances. Recording entries into my reflective journal allowed me to independently look back on each days' events to refresh my memory, reflecting upon and reliving my experiences, questioning why I chose to manage certain situations in the way that I did. I could then plan how to approach the next days' tasks and consider how to tailor my teaching towards the children's best interests.

### **Initial observations and introduction to the use of songs in teaching:**

One of the very first observations that I made during my time on placement in The Gambia was the ubiquity of rote learning in classrooms; the children spent the majority of the school day monotonously reciting and repeating sentences and phrases spoken by the teacher herself in all subject areas. These tedious repetitions resulted in the children quickly losing focus and their overall attention spans were extremely minimal. Furthermore, no efforts were made to motivate the children, inexorably affecting and obstructing their desire to learn, especially in a foreign language. Although rote learning and memorizing information can be useful in developing foundational knowledge's and improving one's ability to quickly recall basic information (Oxford Learning, 2017), to me, it appeared that the children were simply attending to the information rather than actually acquiring any knowledges or understandings. In one of my first diary entries, I explain:

*“after hearing the children repeat various types of weather (e.g., ‘there is sun, it is raining, it is windy’), I suggested to the teacher to ask them what the weather ‘today’ was like...at first, in the whole class of over sixty children, not one child was able to understand what the question was asking. Finally, after a prolonged time, one of the older boys shouted <sun> to which the teacher straightaway responded with <yes, there is sun> for the class to repeat”.*

In the example above, it appears that although relevant words and phrases were added to each child's general English vocabulary, they were unable to transfer these to a real-life situation, suggesting that 'meaningful learning' was not achieved. Mayer (1999) describes this learning outcome as a construct in which students engage in active cognitive processing, mentally organizing incoming information into a coherent representation, and integrating information with existing knowledge (2002, pg.227).

Although the children attended to and could recall relevant information subjected to them, they did not understand, nor construct meaning from it; I thus decided that during the times I would be taking over the class, I would devise a more innovative way in which to approach my methods of teaching, and subsequently, their learning.

Incorporating the use of songs in the teaching of foreign languages to young learners can be considered as an extremely valuable pedagogical tool, often acting as a welcoming change from the routines and expectations of rigid curriculums (Millington, 2011). A variety of benefits have been accredited to the use of songs in the classroom as they not only “contain language patterns, but also develop listening skills, pronunciation and rhythm, and provide a fun learning atmosphere” (Džanić & Pejić, 2016, pg.40). I wanted to ensure that the classroom area was one in which the children felt relaxed in, and through encouraging them to engage with authentic media such as songs and music in a more fun way, hoped that they would be enthused enough to actively participate. Due to the fact that songs are comprised from a combination of language and music, Larsen-Freeman and Long (2000) argue that their richness in culture and themes, idiomatic and poetic expressions, and therapeutic functions make them a flawless tool for language teaching in primary education (pg.147). In this way, through ensuring to implement songs into my daily class schedule, I was able to introduce new vocabularies, culture, and focus on pronunciation and intonations (Conesa & Rubio, 2015) in a way which was developmentally appropriate and most importantly, intrinsically enjoyable and rewarding for the children themselves.

### **The behaviourist theory and influences towards my methods of teaching:**

The decision to use songs as a principal pedagogical tool during my time teaching in The Gambia was heavily influenced by my knowledges and regard to Skinner's (1957) behaviourist theory which treats language acquisition as operant conditioning. According to Skinner, all verbal behaviours can be explained by the same processes as any other behaviour; it is shaped and maintained by its consequences, but what makes it so unique, is that its first effect is upon another person (Skinner, 1957). The concept of operant conditioning has two key notions; the operant, and the reinforcement. "An operant is an action by the organism-an utterance by the child-which achieves a specific outcome which serves to reinforce the operant" (Elliot, 1981, pg.29).

During my time teaching, I used the principal of positive reinforcement; that is, "modifying behaviours by adding a stimulus to the environment after a behaviour occurs that increases the probability the behaviour will return again" (Salkind & Rasmussen, 2008, pg.94). In my classroom, this was presented in the form of verbal praises, round of applauses and giving themselves a "pat on the back". As quoted in my fourth diary entry:

*"I really think that the kids enjoy singing time with me...the second they return to class from lunch break they're shouting for "music time, song time". I sing about five of six songs with them, and at the end of each one, make sure the class gives each-other a round of applause to which the children giggle and laugh and cheer at... huge smiles on their faces".*

In praising the children upon completion of their singing, I believe that their behaviours were positively reinforced, and this facilitated their levels of motivation to actively engage with the daily singing activities.

Given the relationship between the operants and the reinforcers, Skinner's theory was expanded upon to provide categories for the analysis of verbal behaviours, referred to as 'verbal operants', and classified by their relation to discriminated stimulus, reinforcement, and further verbal responses (Chomsky, 1959). Skinner believed that the meaning of words or sentences was not in the words or sentences themselves, but rather in the complexity of extended relationships with their controlling variables (1957). Therefore, he devised two terms used to distinguish between elementary verbal responses. As explained by Cruvinel & Hübner, the first term, 'tact' refers to "the emittance of a verbal response such as "ball" in the presence of the object of a ball under the control of social reinforcement received when this response occurs". The second term, 'mand', "refers to a verbal response being emitted under control of the reinforcement of physically receiving the ball in his hands when this response is emitted" (Cruvinel & Hübner, 2011, pg.736). In acknowledging this, when I had to teach the children a completely new topic about animals, I decided to bring along some wooden farm animal stencils I had brought across from the UK to use both as a visual, and physical reinforcer during singing time. Whilst teaching the children the nursery song "*Old Macdonald had a farm*", I was able to invite a number of children up to the front of the class and hold one of the stencils to essentially, 'become' that animal, acting out the appropriate actions and noises. In having this 'mand' reinforcement, I hoped that the children were able to make associations with their verbal responses and the physical wooden animal object, supporting their newly acquired vocabularies.

**Linguistic and Affective factors of songs in the teaching of English as a foreign language, and reflection of my implementation of this during my placement:**

As briefly mentioned in my introductory section, the use of songs in the primary classroom has been accredited with an array of benefits in various developmental realms. According to Conesa & Rubio (2015), these benefits can be summarised under two headings; 'linguistic factors', and 'affective factors' (pg.7).

**Linguistic factors:**

As explained by Peacock (1997), through being aurally and orally transmitted, songs and music both contain phonetic, syntactic and semantic components which help to contribute towards a child's development of the English language. In using songs, children are additionally exposed to prosodic language features of English, such as natural rhythms, sounds, and stress-patterns, which may be somewhat difficult to grasp if presented to them through purely visual forms such as in textbooks. There are significant phonemic differences between the tribal dialects spoken by children in The Gambia and in the English language, so using the medium of songs allowed the children to listen to and practice the correct pronunciations of specific words and phrases in a way which was not academically pressurising. Nelson (1997) asserted that the rhythm that verses of a song contain aids the development of children's language fluency, while rhyming words of a song help children focus on pronouncing them correctly. In acknowledgement of this, the songs that I chose to teach the children focused primarily on consonant pronunciations, and rhyme.

For example, in teaching the *children 'Row, row, row your boat'*, they were given the opportunity to practice their pronunciation of the letter 'r' in the word 'row', 'stream', 'merrily' and 'dream'.

Another song that I taught, was *'Twinkle Twinkle little star'* which allowed them to experience rhyme in the word's *'star'*, *'are'*, *'high'* and *'sky'* in alternating sentences. In addition to this, Murphey (1992) asserted that songs are adequate tools for learning languages in the classroom as music can engrave itself and work on our short- and long-term memory. Therefore, I aimed to ensure that the songs I taught the children used frequent monosyllabic words and were fairly repetitive in nature; in this way, I believed that there would be a greater chance for them to internalize and remember new vocabulary words. To exemplify, in teaching the children the song *'If you're happy and you know it'*, I was not only able to review the different body parts, but also set the context for their vocabulary learning. Furthermore, in adding rhythmic accompaniments such as clapping, finger snapping and foot stamping (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2004) to songs such as this, the children's sensory and visual inputs were enhanced, creating a more memorable experience. Implementations such as these can be further recognised as affective factors of using songs in primary classrooms.

#### *Affective factors:*

The affective factors of language acquisition relate to those of the learner themselves, such as their "motivation, attitude, socialization, self-image, ego and so forth" (Gass & Schachter, 1989, pg.58). It emphasizes the importance of appropriate learning environments and methods of teaching, rather than the cognitive processes which occur. The first, and perhaps, most obvious way that songs contribute towards the affective factors of learning, is purely through the enjoyment the participants gain from taking part in singing activities. Children may perceive songs as a form of entertainment rather than academic learning, thus, they can easily be implemented into daily routines, creating a more relaxed, informal, and non-threatening atmosphere in the classroom environment (Millington, 2011).

Phillips asserts that “naturally, children really enjoy learning and singing songs and have fun doing activities while reciting rhymes” (Phillips 1993, pg.100). On reflection, I believe that this was clearly evident during my time teaching in the Gambia. Incorporating songs into the children’s daily routines added an element of variety, and furthermore, provided an opportunity for them to engage in an intrinsically enjoyable activity. From a wider cultural perspective, in The Gambia, “music is inextricably bound up with the cycles of work, initiation, marriage and birth, and where every activity is the occasion of song, improvisation and rhythm” (Dorian et al, 1999, pg.618)”. Its contribution towards a rich cultural and traditional heritage means that children in The Gambia are exposed to music and song from a very young age. In this way, I was reassured that incorporating this into class routines would not subject the children to an unfamiliar or stressful activity, but one which they regularly and enthusiastically took part in outside of their educational institution. In acknowledging this fact, it is interesting to consider why song is not already embedded in learning within the Gambian educational context considering its cultural significances.

A further important factor to consider is that of motivation, although difficult to explain because “different people are motivated by different things” (House, 1997, pg.10). As a teacher, it was important for me to consider both individual and larger group dynamics, especially as my class size was so large. I believed that the use of songs could facilitate me towards maintaining positive levels of motivation in such a large group due to the emotions they would evoke in my students. One of my entries states: *“whenever I’m standing at the front of the class singing with the children, nearly every child I look at has a beaming smile across their face and when we finish a song, echoes of ‘again, again’ can be heard circulating the classroom”*.

This diary entry would support the notion that the children were thoroughly enjoying the singing activities, and positive emotions arousing their general mood were evident through my direct observation of the class. In this way, the variety of songs I used in my class stimulated the children's interest and attention, "which can help maintain classroom motivation, thereby helping learners to reach higher levels of achievement" (Nadera, 2015, pg.370).

### **Conclusion:**

Appleby (2010) expressed that participating in a range of communities which offer different perspectives can help us question and think more clearly about our own values and actions. I thoroughly believe that this experience has not only helped me to embrace my strengths as a working professional, but further reinforced the importance of reflecting on practice to question, learn, and revise my understandings, (Bharuthram, 2018). In my future teaching career, I will thus strive to ensure that my own pedagogy does effectively implement curriculum, but also stimulates and fosters children's minds.

One way in which to ensure this, and in the case of this study, is through acknowledging the positive benefits to learning through the use of song, and its abilities to enrich the general learning experiences of any child under my instruction.

Word count: 3343



### Reference List:

- Appleby, K. (2010) 'Reflective thinking; reflective practice' in Reed, M, & Canning, N. (eds.) *Reflective Practice in the Early Years*. Los Angeles: SAGE, pp.7-23.
- Bassot, B (2016) *The Reflective Journal*, 2nd edn, London: Palgrave.
- Bharuthram, S (2018) 'Reflecting on the Process of Teaching Reflection in Higher Education' in *Reflective Practice*, 19 (6), pp 806-817.
- Bolton, G (2010) *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*. London: SAGE.
- Boud, D & Walker, D (1998) 'Promoting reflection in professional courses: the challenge of context', *Studies in Higher Education*, 23 (2), pp.191-206.
- Central Intelligence Agency (2018) 'The World Factbook: Africa: The Gambia'. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ga.html> (Last accessed: 03/04/2019)
- Chomsky, N (1959) 'A Review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior', *Language*, 35 (1), pp.26-58.
- Conesa, I & Rubio, A (2015) 'The use of rhymes and songs in the Teaching of English in Primary Education', *Docencia e Investigación*, 25 (2), pp.83-101.
- Cruvinel, A & Hübner, M (2003) 'Analysis of the Acquisition of Verbal Operants in a Child from 17 months to 2 years of ages', *Psychological Record*, 63(4), pp.735-750.
- Curtain, H. & Dahlberg, C (2004). *Language and Children: Making the Match*. New York: Wesley Publishing Company.
- Dewey, J (1938) *Experience and Education*. New York: Simon and Schuster Inc.
- Dixon, N (1999) *The Organizational Learning Cycle: How We Can Learn Collectively*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Hampshire: Gower Publishing Limited.

Dorian, F, Duane, O, & McConnachie, J (1999) *World Music: Africa, Europe and the Middle East*. London: Rough Guides Ltd.

Džanić, N & Pejić, A (2016) 'The Effect of Using Songs on Young Learners and Their Motivation for Learning English', *New Trends in Social and Liberal Sciences: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1 (2), pp.40-54.

Elliot, A (1981) *Child Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Forrest, C (2005) 'Kolb's Learning Cycle', *Train the Trainer*. Available at:

[www.structuredlearning.com/cx-content/.../Kolb\\_article\\_for\\_Train\\_the\\_Trainer.pdf](http://www.structuredlearning.com/cx-content/.../Kolb_article_for_Train_the_Trainer.pdf)

(Last downloaded: 05/04/19)

Gass, S & Schachter, J (1989) *Linguistic Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gibbs, G (1988) *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. London: FEU.

House, S (1997) *An Introduction to Teaching English to Children*. London: Richmond Publishing.

Kolb, D (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as The Source of Learning and Development*. London: Prentice-Hall.

Larsen-Freeman, D & Long, M (2000). *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. Shanghai: Shanghai FL Education Press.

Mayer, R (1999) *The Promise of Educational Psychology*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Mayer, R (2002) 'Rote vs Meaningful Learning', *Theory into Practice*, 41 (4), pp.226-232.

McGregor, D & Cartwright, L (2011) *Developing Reflective Practice*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Millington, N (2011). Using songs effectively to teach English to young learners.

*Language Education in Asia*, 2 (1), pp.134-141.

Murphey, T, (1992) *Music and Song*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nadera, B (2015) 'Promoting student motivation in EFL classroom: Through extended music education', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 199, pp.368-371.

Nelson, T (1997) *English Nursery Rhymes for Young Learners*. Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd.

Oxford Learning (2017) 'The Difference Between Rote Learning and Meaningful Learning', Available at: <https://www.oxfordlearning.com/difference-rote-learning-meaningful-learning/> (Last accessed: 04/04/2019)

Peacock, M. (1997). *The Effects of Authentic Materials on EFL Learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Phillips, S. (1993) *Young Learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Piaget, J (1971) *Biology and Knowledge*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rodgers, C (2002) 'Defining reflection: Another look at John Dewey and Reflective Thinking', *Teachers College Record*, 104 (4), pp.842-866.

SABER Country Report (2013) 'The Gambia: Early Childhood Development'.

Available at:

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/784541467991911674/pdf/100063-WP-PUBLIC-ADD-SERIES-Box393216B-SABER-ECD-The-Gambia.pdf> (Last

downloaded: 03/04/2019)

Salkind, N & Rasmussen, K (2008) (eds) *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology*.

London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Skinner, B (1957) *Verbal Behaviour*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Stevens, D & Cooper, J (2009) *Journal Keeping: How to Use Reflective Writing for Learning, Teaching, Professional Insight and Positive Change*. Virginia: Stylus Publishing LLC.

The World Bank (2018) 'The World Bank in The Gambia: An overview'. Available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gambia/overview> (Last accessed: 03/04/2019)