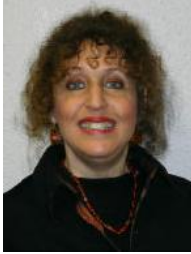


It's Music to My Ears: Using Orff-Schulwerk Principles in the Foreign Language Classroom



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Lorin Pritikin has been teaching French for more than twenty years in Chicago, Illinois. The last 17 years, she has been teaching all levels of high school language and literature at the Francis W. Parker School, a JK-12 Independent School on Chicago's lakefront. Ms. Pritikin has been a frequent presenter at professional conferences and has offered teacher training nationally and internationally on a broad range of topics including: differentiation for students with language-based learning challenges; non-traditional approaches to teaching foreign language to learning disabled students; *la francophonie*; and survival skills for new teachers. Ms. Pritikin designed and implemented her school's first alternative foreign language program for at-risk students--i.e., students who had had prior failures in foreign language learning or who were diagnosed with language learning deficits. The program was inaugurated in 1995 and has served as a model for similar programs in a number of other schools in Illinois and in other states. Ms. Pritikin is currently working with a foreign language publishing house to develop teacher resources for modifying traditional foreign language programs to meet the needs of language-challenged students.

German composer Carl Orff believed that children like to learn music by keeping a beat: clapping, singing, chanting rhymes, dancing, or simply tapping out a beat on anything near at hand. Orff believed that these instincts are directed into learning music by hearing and making it first, then writing and reading it later. Orff developed an approach to teaching music through poems, rhymes, games, songs, and dances that are often accompanied by clapping or stomping, or by drums, sticks, and bells. Orff-Schulwerk (the German term for schooling through work that is active and creative) fosters the use of improvisation and composition, which Orff felt started music students on "a lifetime of knowledge and pleasure through personal music experience" (American Orff-Schulwerk Association web site).

Language, too, is first acquired by hearing and making it, and it is only much later that the writing and reading of language is learned (some oral-only languages of the world are never transcribed into a written system). *It is this orientation of hearing and making sounds and rhythms first, before learning to read and write that can transform traditional foreign language classrooms into engaging, active, fun, and effective laboratories.* I use the word laboratories intentionally because a laboratory is a place where experimentation takes place. And it is this notion of the classroom as a laboratory that I would like to encourage as I propose a new starting point for all foreign language classrooms, regardless of the age of the learner or the phonetic structure of the language. I believe that this orientation to language learning, one with an introduction to the sounds and the rhythm of a particular language, will start *foreign language students* on a lifetime of knowledge and pleasure through personal *language* experience.

Orff techniques are well suited to the foreign language classroom. *The purpose of this workshop is to encourage foreign language teachers to participate in Orff training in their area and to integrate non-traditional approaches to teaching into the traditional foreign language classroom.* There are Action Labs (see attached brochure) offered at many Orff centers throughout the United States and Europe (there are a number of Orff web sites that list the location of centers).

Starting at the Very Beginning: the Sound/Symbol Connection

Teachers of foreign language rarely begin their first or second year courses with explicit instruction on the sound/symbol connections--i.e., the sounds of the alphabet. At the very most, teachers in a traditional foreign language classroom teach the names of the letters of

the alphabet and have their students sing the alphabet song in the target language or spell words using the name of the letter in the target language. In immersion programs or purely communicative classrooms, teachers begin using the target language from day one and it is assumed that all students can assimilate what they hear into accurate sound production and usage.

All foreign language instruction should begin with an articulatory phonetics unit, lasting two to three weeks, where students learn how the sounds of the language “feel” (i.e., explicit instruction on how to produce the sound--tongue and lip position, aspirated sound, non-aspirated sounds, etc.) before they ever read the language in print. Current research in foreign language pedagogy has indicated that pronunciation “is often relegated to the laboratory manual, to stepchild status within the communicative approach, or is eliminated altogether” (Arteaga, 2000). Pronunciation sections in textbooks are frequently “incomplete and inaccurate” (Arteaga, 2000) and are often located in small paragraphs imbedded in the middle of a chapter. If students gain confidence about how to produce the sounds of a new language, and explicitly learn the connection between the sounds they are producing and the transcription of the sounds into symbols, i.e., the letters of the alphabet, students’ pronunciation and writing will improve in accuracy.

The First Great Debate: Meaning-Based vs. Phonics-Based Reading Instruction in the Native Language Classroom

In the 1950s, debates were taking place about the best way to teach reading in one’s native language. In 1955, a revolutionary book by Rudolph Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, challenged the prevailing views on beginning reading instruction, which relied heavily on the “sight method,” with words introduced by meaning first. Flesch argued that “too many children were not learning to read for the simple reason that the logic and use of the alphabetic principle was not being taught” (Adams, 1997). Flesch advocated a return to a phonic approach, one that taught the connection between letters and the sounds they make, as the best approach for teaching reading.

After more than a decade of confusion and argumentation, in 1967, one of the foremost experts on literacy, Dr. Jeanne Chall, a professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, wrote her pivotal work, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. “The results of her research were clear and stunning: relative to those programs that were built around whole-word instruction or that relied on teaching phonics in context, those that included systematic phonics instruction resulted in significantly better word recognition, better spelling, better vocabulary, and better reading comprehension” (Adams, 1997). Despite the popularity of whole-language literacy programs, ones which de-emphasize phonics and which stress sight-word identification and contextual meaning, “current research indicates a swing back to a greater focus on building the phonics and skills base” (Putnam, 1997).

The Second Great Debate: The Natural Approach vs. Explicit Grammar Instruction in the Foreign Language Classroom

Similar debates about the most effective way to teach toward foreign language literacy have also abounded. One cannot make decisions about best classroom practice or the most effective approach to teaching *foreign language* without considering the *native language/foreign language interface, as foreign language teachers are teachers of language, first and foremost*. As with native language classrooms, there has been a transformation in the foreign language classroom away from explicit instruction of grammar and pronunciation to the communicative competence model or *Natural Approach* (Kraschen, 1983), which promotes language acquisition (understanding through meaningful input) over language learning (understanding the mechanics of language through explicit instruction of grammar).

The *Natural Approach* de-emphasizes explicit grammar instruction and focuses on exposing students of a foreign language to meaningful communication, or comprehensible input. Despite

the popularity of communicative models of instruction, the debate continues about whether or not accuracy is compromised for fluency with a communicative approach. Educators and researchers increasingly find that “second language learners frequently lack linguistic accuracy. Some researchers attributed learners’ lack of linguistic accuracy in the 1990s to early second language instruction, which emphasized a communicative approach to language learning and de-emphasized knowledge of grammar. Studies now support the claim that when second language learners’ attention is focused mainly on meaning, linguistic accuracy suffers” (Renou 2000).

There are also concerns that the communicative competence model does not take into consideration the complex nature of language learning or the differing needs of the language learner. In addition, the *Natural Approach* discourages overt error correction because the role of the teacher is to facilitate communication through the modeling of accurate usage, not to inhibit communication through correction. However, some students who are in a foreign language classroom for less than one hour per class period, and for sometimes only three times per week, will not assimilate correct usage and will instead develop bad habits, or “fossilized errors.”

The *Natural Approach* places less emphasis on correct usage and greater emphasis on communicative competence--i.e., is what the speaker said intelligible? Whether to use the Natural Approach or an explicit grammar approach should not be an either/or proposition. It is important to infuse many different approaches into effective language teaching, native or foreign. In order to meet the needs of a diverse classroom, it is critical to establish the sound/symbol connection of any language, particularly for those students who have phonemic awareness problems (i.e., difficulty discriminating sounds by ear and understanding the symbols/letters that represent the sounds) or auditory processing difficulties (i.e., reproducing sounds accurately from auditory cues). Reading specialists have known for years that establishing the correlation between the sounds of a language and the symbols representing the sounds is critical to accuracy in speaking, reading and writing. It is for this reason that starting with the sounds and the rhythms of language makes sense, if a major objective of one’s language program is basic literacy.

The Orff/Literacy Connection

Dr. Seuss books are very popular with emerging, young readers because through the rhymes and rhythms, young children can identify patterns. Patterns make language predictable. Children can then learn to extend patterns and find new words that fit the same pattern. By developing phonemic awareness and moving through this process, children expand their vocabulary, improve their decoding skills, and develop into fluent readers.

Early music education often has children learn music-symbol reading and music-text reading by many of the same approaches used in the reading classroom. In their excellent article, “Linking Music Learning to Reading Instruction,” Dee Hansen and Elaine Bernstorf explored the relationship between the teaching of reading skills and the teaching of music skills. They deduced that “most basic skills used in text reading or decoding (i.e., the breaking of the visual code of symbols into sounds) find parallels in music reading ” (Hansen and Bernstorf, 2002). Their work revealed that music education enhances reading abilities. “At the decoding stage, students learn to echo-clap rhythmic patterns and then generate their own patterns for others to echo. Music-text reading is taught at the emerging level by asking children to aurally identify the words that rhyme in a song and then to replace those words with new words that rhyme” (Hansen and Bernstorf, 2002). Learning that music symbols represent musical sounds is similar to learning that orthographic symbols (i.e. letters) represent sounds for reading. Learning that words are broken down into phonemes--the smallest unit of oral language--which represent parts of a whole word, is like learning that notes represent the part of a whole melody or song.

The Orff technique to teaching music begins with the premise that “feeling precedes intellectual understanding. Orff has evolved an approach to music education which starts with the basic element of music that is most natural to the child--that element which he has experienced and felt since birth in all his life activities, and in speech and movement particularly. That element of course is rhythm. And it is through the rhythm of the child's speech and movement that we can best encourage him to explore music” (*Orff Echo*, 1999). Orff music education uses this innate tendency to hear rhythm in spoken language and teaches the child to “listen”, which is different from hearing. “The ability to listen, however, involves not only hearing, but focusing the mind on the sounds perceived. The ability to pay attention is not innate, but is a learned skill, and the young child needs training and help in order to acquire it. The development of the active listening skill is fundamental to moving, singing, playing, and music creativity, and later to reading, writing, and performing” (Booker, Suzuki-Orff School for Young Musicians).

Orff and the Foreign Language Classroom

The multisensory nature of music learning through Orff techniques, encouraging students to “feel” the music, lends itself very well to helping students “feel” the foreign language they are exploring. Music education often taps into many of the senses. Hansen and Bernstorff maintain that “discontinuing music programs could deprive students of kinesthetic, aural, oral, visual, and emotional experiences that will ultimately bring the written texts to life” (Hansen and Bernstorff, 2000). Orff sensory exploration of rhythm and sound can be adapted to the foreign language classroom and can help students “feel” what they say, and understand the relationship between what they say and read, and ultimately understand the relationship between what they say and write.

In order for foreign language teachers to use Orff principles in the classroom, they do not need to be musical. They simply need to be able to make their language come alive rhythmically--they need to have rhythm!

Classroom Objectives: Automaticity and Fluency. The objective of using Orff techniques in the foreign language classroom is to have the students develop automaticity to their speaking and reading by developing a firm relationship between the sounds and symbols (letters) of the language. Students become more fluent by “feeling” the language through its rhythm. This automaticity progresses into fluency, which is defined as “expressing oneself smoothly, easily and readily...having freedom from word identification problems” (Harris and Hodges, 1981).

Explicit Instruction: The Alphabet. To facilitate student success in speaking and writing, it is critical to start with the alphabet of the foreign language. However, it is a common error of foreign language teachers to think that they are teaching the alphabet when they teach the names of the letters. This practice is not equivalent to teaching students how the language “feels.” Rather, teachers need to teach the sounds the letters and letter combinations represent. Teachers need to explicitly teach students how to produce the sounds, by talking about the position of their lips, their tongue, and their jaw. They need to explain where in the body the sound is made; for example, the difference between the Spanish and Italian “r” is that it is produced with the lips and the tongue, whereas the French “r” is guttural and is produced in the throat. After students learn how to produce the sounds, they learn patterns, thus making the foreign language less foreign, more predictable.

Tonic (Stress) Accent and Intonation. Along with learning pronunciation of individual sounds, students ultimately learn about inflection and intonation. In Spanish, for example, the stress syllable in a word is usually on the second to last syllable (exceptions are marked with accent marks), whereas in French, the stress accent is on the last syllable, regardless of how many syllables are contained in the word.

Echo-Clapping and Rhythm Instruments. The best way to teach the rhythm of a language is through the use of an Orff technique called echo-clapping and the use of rhythm instruments. Students learn syllabication and stress accentuation of individual words and ultimately of entire lines of text (simple poetry in the target language works extremely well when having students work with extended text). Echo-clapping is where the speaker simultaneously claps and says a single word or lines of text. The teacher serves as a model for the student, who subsequently echo-claps what (s)he has heard. After echo-clapping, students move to the use of rhythm instruments, which can be as simple as a desktop or can include rhythm sticks, drums, finger cymbals, tambourines, etc. Students use the same technique as echo-clapping, only now simultaneously play the rhythm of a word or text on their instruments. The order of the exercise is the following:

- Teacher models rhythm through echo-clapping;
- Student echo-claps rhythm of word or text;
- Teacher plays rhythm of word or text on instrument;
- Student plays rhythm of word or text on instrument.

The teacher moves from individual students speaking and playing the rhythm and then proceeds to a group exercise and has the class speak and play the same rhythm. The teacher can act as the conductor and play with the group or can listen for accuracy, without participating. Ultimately, after much practice, the student recites lines of text without the instrument (the student can arrive at this point within the same class period with minimal amounts of material, or can practice at home with lengthier text and return to a subsequent class period and recite text without instruments).

It must be noted that maintaining maximum classroom control is critical to the effectiveness of using Orff techniques. The teacher must explicitly set rules for when students handle their instruments and must emphasize that (s)he is the conductor who gives the commands. Students are to pick up their instruments and put them down, following teacher commands to do so. In addition to setting the "rules of the road," the teacher must also clearly stipulate consequences for mishandling of instruments. This holds true for any age student, including high school students.

Teaching Toward Independence. Modeling usage and having students imitate proper pronunciation and intonation is important for achieving fluency. *Practice is the key to success, with music and with foreign language acquisition.* If possible, teachers should record text in the target language on audio cassettes so students can use the tapes outside of the classroom, to maximize practice. Students should have an auditory model of proper pronunciation and intonation to follow. The rationale for using the Orff techniques in the foreign language classroom is to enable students to find their "comfort zone" within a foreign language and to speak, read, and write fluidly. First, this is achieved through rhythmic echo-clapping, then saying and playing the word or words on a rhythm instrument. Students will begin to be able to read and speak the foreign language, while their bodies will "feel" the rhythm of what they are reading or saying. *The ultimate goal is to have students gain a "feel" for the language, but without hearing a model or using instruments.* Students' use of the language will become more intuitive and more natural.

Conclusion

Foreign language teachers need to think of new ways to package old curricula, particularly if they are going to be effective in reaching diverse learning styles. The Orff-Schulwerk method teaches rhythm and sound "based on a young person's natural, playful impulses towards movement and vocal expression" (Suzuki-Orff School for Young Musicians brochure). Innovative programs offered by Orff centers help to "harness the power of music to promote

literacy” and “explore strategies for creating curricular elements that integrate the arts into core academic subjects, with special emphasis on reading” (Suzuki-Orff School for Young Musicians brochure). Orff rhythm techniques, used traditionally to enhance *native language* literacy, can be effectively adapted for the *foreign language* classroom and can facilitate the same kind of communicative competence in speaking, reading, and writing of foreign language. Orff techniques for song, speech, and movement can make learning and teaching foreign language more joyful and more effective.

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