

Traditional Songs in the Contemporary EFL Classroom: An Exploration of Role and Repertoire

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the utility of traditional songs and singing for Japanese university students of English as a foreign language. Traditional songs in this context are defined as an acoustic repertoire, based on a capella singing and focused mainly on songs whose origins and popularity precede or preclude the necessity of instruments and recording technology — in short, a repertoire rooted simply in the human voice.

The value of pop-songs as a versatile medium in the university EFL classroom is widely documented by and for teachers, and evidenced in a broad range of text books and academic documents utilizing pop-recordings that are, by definition, popular. Whilst it is clear that pop music holds considerable appeal for university students, the use of traditional songs at university level is somewhat less fashionable. This paper seeks to investigate the value of traditional songs as an alternative or supplement to pop songs.

Based on Japanese university classroom and workshop experience, and student feedback, this preliminary study identifies patterns in student reactions to traditional songs and active singing, and discovers a range of benefits both within and outside the classroom. By way of extension, it

goes on to proffer a number of traditional songs, including simple rounds, cumulative/counting songs, and bi-cultural songs such as the Meiji *shoka* and others whose melodies are well known in Japan, that may be valuable both as academic materials and as a personal resource enabling students to actively participate in the English speaking community both locally and overseas. It looks at potential issues in such a proposition and suggests approaches that might enhance or highlight the perceived relevance of old songs in a modern day setting.

2. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Recent classroom experience of song use was gained in two contexts: regular compulsory EFL courses, and special lecture-workshops, at two private universities in Kyoto. Two types of qualitative data were generated in the form of written feedback in a choice of Japanese or English. All feedback has been translated into English for the purposes of this report.

2.1 Feedback from Regular Compulsory EFL Courses

General, anonymous, open feedback forms were presented to a total of 264 students in 9 compulsory English courses at the end of a 14 week semester. Students were simply invited to mention positive and negative points about their course. There was no prompting as to which topics or activities to mention, and no prompts were given as to course content. In each of these courses a traditional song, *The Rattlin' Bog*, had been taught in three stages at the end of three consecutive classes.

The courses surveyed included the following student types: First-year non-English majors (1N); Second-year non-English majors (2N); First-year English majors (1E); Second-year English majors (2E).

2.1.1 Results

The following table indicates the number and percentage of students who mentioned the song in the **positive** section of their feedback form.

	Student type	Class size	Song in positive section	
Class 1	1N	29	17	(59%)
Class 2	1N	33	11	(33%)
Class 3	1N	37	12	(32%)
Class 4	1N	38	19	(50%)
Class 5	1E	21	08	(38%)
Class 6	1E	22	05	(23%)
Class 7	2E	22	10	(45%)
Class 8	2N	28	13	(46%)
Class 9	2N	34	22	(65%)
Total /average		264	117	(44%)

There was no mention of song in the negative section of any the feedback forms.

In the case of these nine classes, the use of traditional song featured positively in 44% of students' spontaneous memories of their course. Since there is no mention at all of song in the negative section of the feedback form, it may be deduced, omissions/indifference notwithstanding, that the overall impact of the song was positive.

This feedback was not originally collected for the purpose of assessing the impact of song, but was employed here since song was so often mentioned. More detailed and wider surveys may indicate significant variations in terms of various factors including gender, group size and precise measures of English ability.

2.2 Feedback from Special Lecture-Workshops

A total of 105 students were invited to comment after two one-off lecture-

workshops in traditional English language songs (from Britain and America) presented as special open classes for English majors and students of various social studies courses. Songs were presented a capella or with very simple guitar or percussion accompaniment (bodhran (Irish drum), bones, or spoons) and students were actively encouraged to join in singing whenever they wished, particularly in choruses or refrains. Word sheets were provided. After each lecture-workshop students were invited to express their feelings about the songs and singing, and to write openly any other comments they might have.

2.2.1 Results

The English level of these respondents was significantly higher than the 14-week course groups and their comments were found to articulate more than simply 'I enjoyed it' and were more varied.

Since the results are qualitative in nature they have been previously classified and are used here as illustrations of each of four main perceived categories as follows:

Satisfaction (pleasure in the moment, including momentary English fluency); **Desire** (expressions of a wish for more); **Realization** (of connections or relevance in a wider context); **Inspiration** (for future and independent pursuits).

Where available, the students' year and major are given e.g. 1E= 1st year English major, 2EA= 2nd year English and American studies major.

2.2.1.1 Satisfaction

Students wrote of a variety of emotional and physical reactions related to pleasure. These included fun/enjoyment/happiness, energy, relaxation, positivity, confidence, unity with others, and sense of freedom. Of particu-

lar interest were the comments from students who contrasted the singing experience with their usual class experience or remarked upon reduced self-consciousness about their English level. The pleasure of group unity was mentioned in conjunction with that of safety in numbers and the unaccustomed sense of power in the ability to enjoy a communal English activity that did not necessitate total comprehension or universally equal fluency in the language.

Selected comments:

Simple pleasure

- *I feel that those days I was nervous for my life...but I started to think much positive and I was so comfortable.* 3EA
- *Songs made me happy and relax. The time when I sang together was set me free.* 1E
- *The idea of chorusing was wonderful too. I really, really enjoyed singing.* 1E

Pleasure in use of language

- *I cannot speak English or understand it well, but the atmosphere of singing together was so good.* 1EA
- *The chorus was a little difficult, but I could sing as a member of class.* 1E
- *I didn't understand all the lyrics but the music crossed the language barrier.*
- *Usually we learn from print, but today I learned many things by listening and feeling.*
- *I couldn't talk well in English but I was interested in English song.*

- *Today's class is the nicest in all the class* 1EA
- *Singing gave me a lot of power.* 2EA
- *It was my first time to have fun in a class* 1E

2.2.1.2 Desire, Realization and Inspiration

Students wrote of other reactions beyond their immediate emotions in the lecture-workshop, such as the **desire** for more, the 'clicking' or **realization** of wider connections, and the **inspiration** of broader ideas and plans. Of particular note were comments suggesting a kindling or re-kindling of interests beyond the classroom, bringing English classes into a position of stimulating their broader life and identity. Several students were moved to consider Japanese traditional music, or the rock and pop they knew, in comparison to the traditional songs of the lecture-workshop, as well as to acknowledge the role of such songs and music in society both past and present in both British/American/Australian societies and their own Japanese society.

Selected comments:

Desire

- *This is the first time I have heard foreign folk songs - I was greatly touched and I hope I will have many opportunities to listen to foreign folk songs again.* 1E
- *I wish I could hear it again.*
- *I became interested in this kind of music.*
- *Since I had almost no experience like this I was inspired.* 1E
- *I felt I would like to dance with that melody.* 1EA

Realization: Musical

- *I usually listen to rock and loud music but today I heard folk songs - I think it's fresh and very nice.*
- *I realized that the human voice is the most beautiful instrument.*
- *I like U2 so I'm interested in Irish music. I'm very glad to sing it. 1EA*
- *Singing in karaoke box is good but I learn this type of music is also cool. I could have a great class today 1E*
- *Acoustic is easy reaching my heart.*
- *I felt something special that I can't feel through the Japanese songs, especially present J-pop doesn't have this kind of slow relaxing rhythm. I was shocked by all the songs - in good meaning. 1EA*
- *I felt some resemblance to Okinawan folk music.*
- *I think melancholic songs rhythm is similar that of Japan, however, cheerful song's rhythm is different. Is it a common for traditional songs in the world? 2E*
- *English songs and American songs is much different. I heard American songs with cheerful feeling. I felt something deep in the English ones.*
- *My feeling about folk song change. I think folksong is not a dark song but rather funny song. 1E*
- *I love Elvis Presley's songs. American songs what I hear ...I can feel Elvis' origin. It's so powerful and sentient. 3*
- *I like British rock music from 50s to 70s, and those bands were influenced by roots music, so I was glad to hear the original kind of songs that inspired them.*
- *I could hear how the Beatles were influenced by folk song.*
- *I don't usually hear songs like this in my daily life.*

- *Somehow I felt I had heard the melody before — there may be some relation between these melodies and some Japanese tunes.*
- *I though folk music was old but my mind changed.*

Realization: Social and other connections

- *It was like I'm in the movie or travel all over the world...1*
- *Folk music is very comfortable and has stories. 1E*
- *It was interesting to learn about the background of songs.*
- *I felt the spirit of the people who used to sing the songs. 1E*
- *Every song makes me realize the world is more near and larger than I thought. 1E*
- *I went to Scotland. All the Scottish songs remind me of the days in Scotland. 1EA*
- *Actually my parents like Celtic music and have some CDs so I know some of the songs you sang. 1EA*
- *I sang a similar song when I was at school.*
- *It reminds me of the music of some movies I have seen, for example Titanic or Braveheart.*
- *I felt a little rude singing about whaling when whaling is now a controversial.*
- *I could really feel that this music is connected to people's lives.*
- *It was a nice opportunity to touch a different culture. 2E*
- *I'm studying Australian History and I learn that prisoners in England send to prison in Australia. 2EA*
- *I enjoyed touching and trying the instruments.*

Inspiration

- *I bought a guitar a few years ago, but recently I haven't played it — now I want to play it again 1EA*

- *I want to sing these songs at home today.* 1EA
- *I came to be interested this kind of music. I really enjoyed singing with you.* 1EA
- *I'm interested in folk song more than before.* 1E
- *It made me want to dance/play guitar.*
- *I have a lot of questions to ask.*

3. ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

In spite of variations in their personal tastes, students of English undoubtedly enjoy listening to pop music in class, not least because they perceive it as a break from the 'normal routines' of class-work. One of the reasons for this is that they are often, at least temporarily, in a passive role, and can 'relax'. However, feedback from students who enjoyed singing traditional songs in their classes indicates that it is also possible for them to relax actively.

Several scales of benefit arise from such active relaxation, both for the individual student, the teacher, and the class as a whole. For the individual student, there arises a sense of unity with others, confidence, motivation and vigor as well as realizations of relevance of their English studies in a wider context. This in turn benefits the teacher-student relationship and the group as a whole in that students bring increased enthusiasm, co-operation, sense of community and, having experienced unaccustomed confidence and fluency, less fear to their classroom.

Traditional songs possess a number of qualities that are uniquely valuable in the EFL classroom. These derive from both within and around the songs, in their content, cultural position and historical path.

By definition, the older body of traditional songs has been orally transmitted. Such a route, in common with evolution, ensures that the surviving old songs are in some way or other 'the fittest'. (A more recent body of songs written 'in traditional style' and accepted into the cultural repertoire conforms to similar patterns, structures and social roles.) This process gives rise to a body of songs that are, by virtue of their survival, by general consensus, stimulating in both form and content, and rich in relevance - cultural or human or both. Among these, are plenty that are linguistically and musically accessible enough for the EFL classroom.

The linguistic features of traditional songs may be quite distinct from those found in pop-music. The orally transmitted lyrics of traditional songs may be the result of a long process of attrition occurring in various regions and eras and, as a result, tend to fall very firmly and naturally into the rhythm and melody. For the same reasons, the match of the lyrics and tune guides the singer toward natural syllable stress and intonation along the lines of jazz chants (see Graham, 1978). Furthermore, the communal singing style has given rise to a consensus of flow and speed that helps students develop fluency in negotiating words to a rhythm and pace that they may not yet have acquired in speech.

By the same token, the survival of these songs by oral transmission has required that they do not rely on instrumentation and may be sung spontaneously. Indeed some repetitive songs such as sea shanties owe their very existence to the fact that they were sung spontaneously (with no briefing or preparation) by international groups who did not necessarily share a language. If instrumental accompaniment is possible, by teacher or students, it is usually the case that the pace is slow and with simple chord structures and thereby accessible to elementary players,

such that those who are so inclined could accompany the song either in class or at home.

In terms of their content, traditional songs address themes that are universal or culturally specific and often a mixture of both. Students may explore the cultural, seasonal and/or human content of the song and be encouraged to explore their own equivalents, and make substitutions to convert the song to their own experience. For example, *The Twelve Days of Christmas* can be reinvented as a song for Japanese New Year, with a new list of gifts. The taboos and vulgar words that can render some pop-songs unsuitable for EFL classes are less frequent in traditional songs and are in any case substitutable by virtue of the flexible oral form. It should not be forgotten that many of these songs have evolved in the past and are sure to continue to do so.

Culturally, traditional songs are by definition well known across generations and, although they may have been originally regional, many have reached an international audience. This has many benefits. Firstly, teachers may know these songs well enough to teach them confidently, even spontaneously, by call and response without a lyric sheet. Secondly, outside of the classroom and long after the course is ended, students may have opportunities to encounter the melody or sing the song with others. The cross-generational international aspect, which is less common in pop-music, may be particularly valuable when opportunities arise for students to travel and study abroad or experience home-stays. Some of the songs also appear in karaoke lists.

However, there are some qualities of traditional songs which may benefit from special awareness and consideration by the EFL teacher. One is

related to image and perception, discussed later, and the others are linguistic. These latter stem largely from the age of the songs (or, in the case of more modern songs written in traditional style, from their historical 'pitch'). These issues can generally be overcome and even turned to advantage but to simply overlook them may be lazy, confusing and miss good opportunities. The greatest of these issues is that of archaic language. This may take the form of poetic grammar (e.g. *he gave to me an apple*), outmoded forms (e.g. *thee, yonder*) or atypical vocabulary (e.g. *stile, rover*) or nonsensical refrains (e.g. *Ranzo-ranzo*). Japanese students cope deceptively well with the repeating and singing of unfamiliar words, and may be quietly mystified. If the song is taught from text, a word game matching synonyms or pictures may be used. Alternatively, and particularly if the song is taught orally/aurally, the teacher may choose to substitute synonymous contemporary vocabulary (e.g. *you* for *thee*; *boat* for *bark*) either initially or permanently. At any rate it is wise to make students aware if they are singing in a poetic or old style. (This might avoid repetitions of the winter vacation essay which began, *On the first day of Christmas my true love and I went shopping*.)

The second significant issue in the use of traditional song is the potential for the perception of old or traditional to mean obsolete or irrelevant. Part and parcel of the enduring nature of these songs is that they intermittently fall in and out of favour/fashion with certain groups and generations (certain old Irish songs for example currently enjoy considerable popularity in Japan in the wake of Riverdance, Lord of the Dance and Celtic Woman). However, it is precisely for this very reason that they are so enduring in the collective consciousness. The teacher can overcome this hurdle by making the songs come alive for the students — pointing out connections to pop and rock songs they know, places they have studied,

movies they have seen, or the latest news. Confidence, vigor and enthusiasm on the part of the teacher need not be mentioned in detail, but clearly the use of traditional songs in class makes rather different demands on both teacher and student than does playing a CD or admiring an artist. Student feedback suggests that these songs can provide a vehicle by which spontaneous connections may be made with their own experience, and this can be exploited to form part of their studies. With only a little background and opportunity for reflection students can use traditional songs to understand their part in a continuum that stretches across generations and national boundaries. By reflecting on the past they may more clearly see their present in a context, and in the particular case of Japan there is a vivid culture of tradition and old songs with which they can compare and contrast English language material. Precise details of supplementary activities is beyond the scope of this paper but the potential for integration into an existing syllabus and extension activities is a broad and rich one (see Murphey, 1992).

4. TOWARDS A REPERTOIRE

This section puts forward some traditional songs, along with some more modern songs in traditional style, that may be considered suitable for EFL classes in Japan. It is divided into three main types: Rounds; Repetitive/cumulative songs; and Lyrical songs.

4.1 Rounds

Rounds offer students a simple form in which to establish fluency of articulation whilst they are otherwise absorbed in musical enjoyment and hidden in cacophony. It is not always necessary to do much explanation or supporting work for rounds, so these can be used as simple musical breaks, fillers or rewards. Short-phrase rounds such as *Chairs to Mend*

are particularly effective for lower levels since a single phrase is repeated by sustained singing. Their execution may require a high degree of concentration, but responsibility is spread and the opportunities of rejoining after stumbling are ample:

Banbury Ale, The Bell Doth Toll, Campfire's Burning, Chairs to Mend, Come Follow Me Merrily, Come Let Us All A-Maying Go, The Crane, Early to Bed, Evening in Here, Fox and Geese, Frere Jacques (Brother John), The Great Bells of Oseney, Great Tom is Cast, Hey, ho, Nobody Home, Hot Mutton Pies, The Huntsmen, Joan, Come Kiss Me Now, Joan Glover, Merrily Merrily, Now We Are Met, Oh, How Lovely is the Evening, Old Abraham Brown, Sumer Is I-cumen In, To the Greenwood, Upon Christ Church Bells in Oxford, Wind, Gentle Evergreen, London's Burning, Rosa Rosa.

4.2 Repetitive/cumulative songs

These 'building' songs have proven to be especially popular in the Japanese EFL classroom. They can be extended or reduced to a flexible length and lend themselves well to substitution activities which adapt them to the students' own experience e.g. *The Twelve Days of Christmas* can be adapted to Japanese new year and a list of contemporary presents may be compiled by the class. The form is not unfamiliar to Japanese students since they have some similarity to the early 20th century Japanese mnemonic 'railroad songs'. I have included some elementary songs here since they may be useful with university students as fun exercises in pronunciation or speed:

Numbers

Green Grow the Rushes, One Man Went to Mow, Ten Green Bottles, Ten

in the Bed, Twelve Days of Christmas.

Other Sequences

The Herring, The Mallard, Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly, Rattlin' Bog, Down to the River to Pray, The Prickle-y Bush, Derry Gaol, Tambo.

Call and Response

Various spirituals and sea shanties

4.3 Bi-cultural songs

A surprising number of old Western song melodies are well known in Japan (see Williams, 2006). Excepting some earlier importations by missionaries and the military, most of these tunes were first introduced to the mainstream Japanese population during the Meiji Restoration 1868-1911 via the first national curriculum textbooks issued from 1881 onwards. This is extensively documented elsewhere (see Eppstein, 1994). Consequently, some Western traditional song tunes are known actively in Japan, having Japanese lyrics. Others are simply familiar through movies, TV advertisements, radio play and so on. 1950s-70s American Folk Revival material is also well known, in particular from Peter Paul and Mary (PPM), Credence Clearwater Revival (CCR) and the repertoire and some compositions of Pete Seeger. Also, a lot of western nursery rhyme tunes such as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, Little Bird and London Bridge* are well known, having Japanese lyrics. Some of these tunes appear in toys, music boxes, telephone asafones, beginners' instrument tutors and in popular children's records such as those issued by Tokyo Kodomo Club. More recently some traditional known tunes have been introduced or revived as a result of pop music or shows such as Riverdance and Celtic Woman which have enjoyed large audiences and received extensive radio play. The pace of these lyrical songs tends to be slow, with a comfortable, melodic mood. The musical scales employed are commonly similar to

Japanese popular songs and therefore easy for students to grasp quickly. The following short list is compiled principally from the Meiji shoka and background music frequently heard Japan:

Amazing Grace, Annie Laurie, Auld Lang Syne, Beautiful Dreamer, Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms, Blue Bells of Scotland (Utsukushiki - Beautiful One), Brahms' Lullaby, Camptown Races, Danny Boy, Early One Morning, Greensleeves, Happy Birthday To You, Hard Times Come Again no More, Home on the Range, I've Got Sixpence, I've Been Working on the Railroad, Last Rose of Summer, Lorelei, Man On The Flying Trapeze, Minstrel Boy, Mockingbird, Muffin Man, My Grandfather's Clock, Nelly Bly (Foster), Old Black Joe (Foster), The Old Folks at Home, Pop Goes the Weasel, Puff The Magic Dragon, Rolling Home, Sally Gardens, Santa Lucia, Scarborough Fair, Sipping Cider Through A Straw, Suil A Ruin, Waltzing Matilda, The Water is Wide, When The Saints Go Marching In, You Are My Sunshine.

5. CONCLUSION

In its original cultural context traditional song was and, to the extent it remains, is an active, inclusive and democratic social mechanism. It contributes to social bonding by facilitating co-operation, communication, empathy and celebration in communities, without the need for high or equal levels of knowledge or skill — vocal, instrumental or otherwise. The findings of this paper based on student feedback suggest that, in the context of the international language learning arena, the all-inclusive role of traditional songs is no different. Students reported not only simple enjoyment, but also unaccustomed relaxation in using English, a sense of unity both with their peers and teachers and broader expressions of connection with distant societies and other aspects of their lives. This,

they reported, gave them vigor for English, and inspirations in other fields: in other words, a realization that what they were studying was, after all, real and relevant and richly connected to the world beyond their classroom

Language learning may seem to emphasize (indeed hope for) differences between countries - this is what makes it necessary after all and, for some at least, interesting and worthwhile - however, it can be disadvantageous to pay too much attention to the aspect of difference. Students and teachers alike benefit from the occasional affirmation of commonality or, to coin a phrase, *interrelational existence* (see Nakamura, 1967). Being both fixed and fluid (see Connell, 2003) traditional songs can act as concrete cultural information whilst at the same time unifying the group into sharing and appreciating their own cultural and human experience.

Songs, least of all those with outmoded language, will not help any student directly to pass examinations of a grammatical nature. However, what they may do, of equal or possibly even greater importance, is give students an opportunity to feel confident, to communicate, participate and belong, whatever their levels and scores. This may in turn lead them to want to study more, by virtue of nurturing a long term engagement with the desire to interact in what they newly perceive as a fascinating, enjoyable and enriching network. With judicious use by an interested teacher, who is willing to tackle anachronisms, update, compare, and make good use of the songs' linguistic and thematic content, the value of traditional songs in language learning can be maximized. Alternatively, there are many songs in the repertoire that are simple, or short, or both, and can simply be enjoyed.

This paper is a preliminary study and does not claim to represent an in depth or fully comprehensive survey. However, the evidence gathered to date suggests that it is possible, simply by the unifying and equalizing activity of singing together, to overcome some of the everyday obstacles to learning - the teacher-student divide, a lack of confidence in the language, a basic shyness, fear of making mistakes, a feeling of incompetence, and a perceived lack of relevance. It appears that traditional songs in the EFL classroom may open doors to confidence and inspiration that can drive students towards measurable progress in language, self-development and cross-cultural understanding.

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