



Songs and poems in the language classroom: Teachers' beliefs and practices



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Singing, listening to songs and reciting poems are seen as useful teaching techniques.
- Singing and poems are considered the most suitable for teaching pronunciation.
- Listening to songs is considered the most suitable technique for introducing a topic.
- While teachers believe these practices are beneficial, many report not using them.
- For teachers who use these techniques, practice is mainly supported by their beliefs.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Finnish language teachers' beliefs and practices related to singing, listening to songs, and reciting poems as teaching techniques, and whether their teaching practices are congruent with their beliefs. Teachers viewed all three techniques as highly beneficial for language learning. Singing and reciting poems were considered most suitable for teaching pronunciation; listening to songs was considered most suitable for introducing topics. For teachers who reported using particular techniques, their practice was supported by their beliefs. However, overall, reported teaching practices did not completely align with teachers' stated beliefs. These findings have implications for teacher training and future research.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, several studies have found that singing has positive effects on language learning. Legg (2009) found that singing facilitates learning words and phrases more effectively than traditional teaching techniques. Alisaari (2015) has shown that singing can be useful for receptively learning structures. It has also been shown that singing is more beneficial for recall and reproducing phrases in a foreign language than rhythmical and normal speech (Ludke, Ferreira, & Overy, 2014). In addition, written fluency

increases more with singing than with rhythmical speech or listening to songs (Alisaari & Heikkola, 2016). In practice, teachers have long used singing, listening to songs, and rhythmic reciting of jazz chants or poems as language teaching techniques (see, for example, Graham, 1992; Murphey, 1990). In spite of this, no reports exist on how common these techniques are in the language classroom. Moreover, little is known about teachers' beliefs or practices with respect to singing, listening to music, or reciting poems as teaching techniques, or how these beliefs and teaching practices are linked.

In Finland, the context of this study, core curricula guide the aims and contents of teaching on every educational level. However, teachers are independent in their choices of pedagogical methods and techniques to be used in the classroom. During the last decade, there has been a shift toward more communicative approaches instead of a grammar-based approach in language teaching. This

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shift has also led to more freedom for individual teachers to choose techniques which they think are useful to create more communicative teaching and learning environment including using songs and poems in the classroom.

Since teachers' beliefs affect their language teaching practices (Barcelos, 2003), there is a need for research concerning teachers' attitudes and practices related to the use of songs and music in language classrooms (Engh, 2013). The authors of this paper argue that attitudes and practices concerning reciting poems in language teaching are also worth investigating, as rhythmic reciting can be beneficial for language learning (see, for example, Holme, 2009; Purnell-Webb & Speelman, 2008). In this study, we investigate the beliefs that Finnish language teachers have about singing, listening to songs, and reciting poems as teaching techniques, as well as the teachers' practice regarding these three techniques. In addition, we examine the link between these beliefs and teachers' reported actions and investigate how a teacher's pedagogical qualifications, working experience, and educational setting are related to both beliefs and actions.

1.1. Language teachers' beliefs and practices

Language teachers' knowledge and beliefs have been defined in many different ways (see the conceptual analysis by Borg, 2006). According to Barcelos (2003), the concept of *language teachers' beliefs* refers to what the teachers think, know, and believe. *Knowledge* is often used to refer to true and objective knowledge, while *beliefs* refer to more subjective, individual opinions (Woods & Çakir, 2011). Generally, people consider their beliefs to represent the truth (Dewey, 1910). In the context of language education, *beliefs* can be defined as teachers' opinions about topics such as learning a second language (L2) (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003) or (as in this case) teachers' views on second-language teaching.

Beliefs are context dependent and are both stable and dynamic at the same time (Dewey, 1910; James, 1913). From a socio-cultural perspective, a person's beliefs are framed by the social realm and are incorporated into one's own personal point of view based both on what is meaningful and what is socially relevant to the individual (Negueruela-Azarola, 2011; Vygotsky, 1986). The views of others may affect a person's beliefs about language teaching (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011), but beliefs are always personal and "expressed by an individual with a unique set of life experiences" (Dufva, Aro, Alanen, & Kalaja, 2011, p. 62).

Beliefs influence our actions and vice versa (James, 1913). In fact, according to Borg (2011), beliefs are the basis of our actions, although, according to Barcelos and Kalaja (2011), their relationship to actions is not simply causal but is more complex. Teachers' previous schooling and professional studies, as well as their working context, curriculum, collegial interactions, and classroom practice affect their beliefs (Borg, 2006; Richards, Tung, & Ng, 1992; Voet & De Wever, 2016). Richards et al. (1992) found that language teachers' beliefs and actions are related to each other as well as to the teachers' experience and training. For example, the more experience and training language teachers have, the more aware they are of the communicative and practical aims of language teaching (Richards et al., 1992).

According to Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, and Son (2004), language teachers' beliefs seem to be in line with general, theoretical knowledge about language learning. However, actions are not always in accord with beliefs (Negueruela-Azarola, 2011). Language teachers' beliefs have often been found to be incongruent with their practice (see, for example, Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Ng & Farrell, 2003; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999), although there are also opposite findings (see, for example, Graden, 1996; Johnson, 1992; Mangubhai et al., 2004; Olson &

Singer, 1994). Karavas-Doukas (1996) and Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) found that even though teachers were positive in their beliefs toward communicative language teaching (CLT), only limited CLT was evident in their teaching practice.

This gap between beliefs and practices could be explained with Borg's (2006) argument that theoretical and practical knowledge are two different sources of knowledge. However, according to Woods & Çakir (2011, p. 386), in practice, we "do what we know." Negueruela-Azarola (2011) also argued, "[t]hat which we know (ideas that are applicable in actual practice) and that which we think we know (ideas about the nature of our ideas and actions) has an influence on what we do (actions) and what we think we do (ideas about our actions that explain *post facto* what we do but do not always orient in practice) (p. 361)".

Overall, a person's experiences and reflections on these experiences are the basis of their beliefs; new understanding is developed by reflecting on previous experiences (Woods & Çakir, 2011). Borg (2006, p. 275) argued that classroom situations also influence language teachers' beliefs. Both experiences and context therefore influence teachers' beliefs, sometimes causing incongruence between beliefs and practice.

In sum, beliefs influence the perceptions language teachers have about teaching and learning and therefore affect language classroom activities (Barcelos, 2003). Because teachers' beliefs affect their language teaching (Barcelos, 2003), obtaining information about these beliefs is valuable for understanding teachers' teaching practices (see also Wan, Low, & Li, 2011).

1.2. Songs and poems in language learning

As early as the 1980s, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) stated in their guidelines for language teaching that singing popular songs is an appropriate technique for practicing speaking for students at different levels of language proficiency (James, 1985). Until recently, however, few studies had specifically examined the use of singing in language classrooms. In recent years, the psychological effects of music have been studied at length. Among its various positive effects, music increases relaxation, enhances energy levels, and brings joy due to the increased amount of oxytocin produced in the brain (Grape, Sandgren, Hansson, Ericson, & Theorell, 2003; Huron, 2006). Furthermore, singing increases the sense of togetherness (Spychiger, Patry, Lauper, Simmermann, & Weber, 1995; Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009), and using songs in the classroom may result in positive effects on group dynamics (Lake, 2003). Singing and music have also been shown to enhance learners' helpfulness toward each other (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010); task performance is also enhanced due to learners' positive and relaxed mood (Hallam, Price, & Katsarou, 2002).

In addition to many positive psychological effects, music has a positive influence on language learning. Music can be used to lower language learners' affective barriers, increase their motivation, or develop different kinds of learning strategies (see Engh, 2013, for a review on the effects of music in the language classroom). Many studies focus on rhythm and melody as ways to promote language learning (see Ludke et al., 2014). Thus, poems and chants (rhythmically recited words and phrases) should be investigated together with music and songs as language teaching techniques based on rhythm. However, studies investigating the use of poems or chants in the language classroom are scarce and concentrate primarily on teachers' reports of using poems or chants to teach pronunciation. For example, in Burgess and Spencer's (2000) study, 47% of teachers used poems and chants to teach pronunciation. In a study by Breikreutz, Derwing, and Rossiter (2001), over 50% of teachers used chants to teach pronunciation. However, according to

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