



Learning language through music: A strategy for building inspiration and motivation[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 March 2013

Received in revised form 9 December 2013

Accepted 31 December 2013

Keywords:

Music

Language learning

Motivation

ABSTRACT

This article diverges from the usual concept of academic research by offering several contrasting sections: a very personal story about how the author (and his young daughter) approached learning English, a research section on motivation, a practical section on how to incorporate Hip Hop into language learning, and some final personal comments. The article explains the language learning strategy the author designed for building up his own inspiration and motivation. He uses the multistep strategy of language learning through his favorite musical style, Hip Hop. The steps include (a) choosing and simply enjoying the music, (b) analyzing the lyrics and creating a personalized textbook based on the lyrics, and (c) deepening the understanding of the underlying culture. This motivating strategy can be employed with any kind of music that has linguistically meaningful and culturally relevant lyrics.

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1. Introduction

This is probably an unusual article for a research journal, but the contribution that my article makes seems to fit here rather well because this special issue is intended to be innovative. I open my article with a brief anecdote about my daughter's language learning, and then I share my own story of using Hip Hop to cope with a difficult learning situation in Taiwan. After that I offer a standard research section related to motivation, because Hip Hop was the motivational spark for my language learning. Strategically learning language with music can build up confidence and motivation (the learner's will to learn), which in turn foster learning. Next I present a highly practical, step-by-step guide about how to incorporate the use of Hip Hop, my preferred strategy, into the language learning process. In that practical application section, I detail the strategy in three parts (choosing the musical material, analyzing the lyrics, and understanding the cultural background) and demonstrate how to transform the music of a learner's choice into pragmatic language learning materials to foster confidence, motivation, and proficiency. I close with personal comments. Each of these parts of the article reflects a different angle on language learning. That is appropriate, because language learning is a multidimensional, multifaceted process.

[☆] The first author wrote this paper in a graduate course on *Becoming a Better Language Learner and User*, taught by Dr. Rebecca L. Oxford at the Air Command and Staff College (ACSC), Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama, USA. Dr. Oxford added to the paper in various ways, but it is presented here in first person singular to capture the authentic voice of Kao Tung-an. The views in the present article do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Air Force or the Air Force of Taiwan. For more on the language of Hip Hop, see [Blake, Rudolph, Oxford, and Boggs \(2014\)](#).

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2. Starting with the personal

I will start with the personal, offering a background concerning my daughter's language learning and my own. I review the language learning situation of Taiwan, my homeland, and show why I needed to develop a special, creative strategy for language learning.

2.1. My daughter and I

As an officer in the Air Force of Taiwan, I need English to do my job. I am studying, working, and living in a foreign country, the United States, where English is the dominant language. I sometimes wonder what kind of life I would have had if I had not put my efforts into English language learning for many years.

A few weeks ago, I sent my elder daughter to an American preschool. It was her first time to attend preschool. What is more, it was not an environment in which she could fluently communicate without significant obstacles. Before her first few days, I actually had not thought much about the communication between my daughter and the other kids or the teachers. The only concern I had was about her cultural adaptability to her new way of daily life. However, the truth she brought home every day confirmed the importance of second language learning, not just cultural adaptation. Her first week was painful. Even though she is a very strong minded little girl, every day she came home and told me that she had no idea what had happened during the day. She just could not communicate. One day she was trying to tell the teacher about being thirsty and looking for water, but because of poor communication the teacher kept trying to feed her desserts and cookies. My daughter burst out crying. In the end, the teacher had to call me to make sure she and my girl were "on the same sheet of music." Clearly, they were not.

Now, weeks later, my daughter is on the right track. She enjoys her days in the preschool and is quickly learning her second language, English. However, the small incident of not being able to communicate about being thirsty reminded me how important a second language is to a foreigner's survival in another country. Taking my girl as an example, consider how upset and desperate she was during first few days, while she could not even express her desire for water and could not ask for help. During the conversations I had with the teachers in the first week, they kept telling me that "she was upset today" or "the conversation just didn't work out." Poor communication always brings misunderstanding and sometimes disaster. That is why a successful second language acquisition strategy is very important for learners in a foreign language setting if they want to understand and be understood by others.

The experiences of my daughter reminded me of the bad old memories that forced me to depart from the Taiwanese school curriculum and to search for my own way of learning English. I found that Hip Hop music, when its contents are used strategically as second or foreign language learning materials with a correct method and attitude, can greatly improve proficiency, motivation, and confidence. I have been using this strategy for my second language learning for two decades.

2.2. Why I needed a good learning strategy: the learning situation in Taiwan

Many students in my country struggle to make progress in second language learning. Back in the 1990's, some people complained that the public school curriculum in Taiwan was problematic because students started their second language learning relatively late. Many parents in Taiwan are anxious about their children's future language ability. In the big cities, students normally attend English cram schools or bilingual schools to avoid falling behind from the beginning (Ho, 2009). According to the *Common Wealth* magazine (Taiwan), in 2002, 90% of school-age children in the capital city, Taipei, attended cram school to study English (Chen, 2002). The Ministry of Education initiated new policies since the millennium, but none of them seemed to work. Based on research data from the *Educational Testing Service* (2007), Taiwanese students' average TOEFL iBT score was 71 between September 2005 and December 2006 (the first year of iBT test), then 76 in the year of 2010 – not much of an improvement (ETS, 2011). The decade of educational reform did not actually bring much success. Even worse, English education in Taiwan is lagging far behind that of most of the other Asian countries. Moreover, Taiwan's English education shows a large gap between children from the city and children from the countryside, primarily because of different curriculum requirements in different local institutes. A child who lives in a metropolis might start his first English class at the age of 6, but a child who lives in a rural area might not start learning phonetic symbols until he or she is 12 years old. When these two children enter the same middle school, one is too bored to learn, and the other gives up the first day. For these teenagers, who already have many problems to handle, English becomes one more problem.

The cram school culture in Taiwan is not something new. This culture had been with Chinese society for thousands of years. The culture of the cram schools is derived from the concept that the elites will always be the successful crowd. The origin of the cram school can be traced back to the age of the great teacher Confucius, who constructed the first private school that accepted all students despite their social class or family income. Back in the days of Confucius, students tried their best to compete for becoming the elites of their year, giving them a chance to work in the imperial government.

According to a report on the *Asiaone Press* website, the number of cram schools (in the report, the term was "tuition schools") skyrocketed from 1200 in 1997 to 7000 in 2006, and 75% of students in Taiwan attended cram school in 2006 (Ho, 2009). For these students, learning was not fun at all. The motivation was not to improve, and the will to learn did not matter; everyone simply waited to get fed as much knowledge as possible, like a duck being fattened up to gain a good price in the academic farmer's market.

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