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## Using karaoke in language classrooms: Exploring potentials and prospects

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### Abstract

Karaoke is an exciting pastime in many cultures. Karaoke singers are expected to sing along melodies of songs and keep up with the lyrics that run at the bottom of the monitor. In this sense, it involves both linguistic processing and language articulation, and thus offers itself for potential use in foreign language classrooms. However, there appears to be a shortage of examination of Karaoke for useful classroom use. This paper will therefore firstly introduce karaoke as a possible classroom activity followed by a description of some technical equipment required. The paper will then explore some potentials and principles that may inform the language teachers of different ways of implementing karaoke in the language classroom.

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### 1. Introduction

Using songs in ELT classes is not a new idea. Songs as an ancient yet a justified tool (Domoney & Harris, 1993) have often been used by language teachers or suggested as a useful classroom resource for a long time. It is ancient in that songs constitute an integral part of our lives, language, and culture, and have always been with us over the course of human history. Justified by various reasons (Engh, 2013; Shoepf, 2001), songs can be used for a variety of purposes including but not limited to presenting a topic, vocabulary, or a grammar point; for both intensive and extensive listening purposes, discussion of attitudes and feeling as well as creating a more related classroom environment (Eken, 1996; Griffie, 1992; Murphey, 1992). In addition a number of different activities that can be

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used with songs in the classroom have now been proposed. Among others, some of the activities are listening & reading activities; pronunciation practice; fill in the blanks; dictation; true-false questions (comprehension); putting lines in correct order; add a final verse; role play & drama; and imagine and draw (For other activities see Eken, 1996; Griffee, 1992; Murphey, 1992).

It is interesting to note that, although there has been a relatively well established rationale and a good list of activities related to using music, songs, and lyrics in ELT classes, considerably limited attention has been paid to a singing activity that has become increasingly popular in the society, namely *karaoke*. Further, there seems to be a lack of theoretical foundation for the use of karaoke in ELT classes. This paper aims to elaborate on the idea of using Karaoke in ELT classes. The paper will firstly briefly review why we can use songs in ELT classes, followed by an introduction and justification of Karaoke as a potential ELT classroom activity. The paper will, then, try to introduce technical equipment required for the activity. Finally, the paper will outline some prospects and principles for effective use of karaoke for pedagogical purposes.

### 1.1. Rationale for using songs in ELT classes

As also stated in the introduction section above, use of songs has a long history in ELT classes (Domoney & Harris, 1993), and has also been scholarly validated (Engh, 2013) for various reasons including affective, cognitive, and linguistic foundations (Shoepf, 2001).

It has long been argued and accepted that *affect* (or socio-affect) is likely to have an impact on how we go about undertaking the task of language learning (for more details see Arnold, 1999; Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Affect often connotes a need for paying attention to feelings in the course of language learning (see for example, Affective Filter Hypothesis, Krashen, 1983). The charm of using songs in ELT classes is easily justified for affective reasons in that due to involvement of music, songs are likely to create a fairly positive environment in the language classroom (Griffee, 1992; Jedynek, 2000). Moreover, songs are often characterized with the youth, and bringing songs to the language classroom can easily create a “*we language*.” This is simply because songs are likely to create a sense of ownership by young adults as songs and lyrics often embrace “... *their* knowledge, *their* music, and *their* language” (Domoney & Harris, 1993, p. 235; emphasis is original).

Secondly, using songs can have a *cognitive* justification. Using songs and music in the classroom can contribute to language development. This may be partly because melodies may exert a mnemonic impact on our memory (Engh, 2013), forming chunks and remaining memorable. From a skills development perspective, learners are expected to go through three main stages through which they progress via practice (For further details see Anderson, 1985; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Ur, 1996). Such progression of the development of language skills is illustrated in Figure 1. The key term that signifies the relevance of using songs in ELT classes appears to be the practice in that songs (listened to and/or sung) can aid development of language skills through meaningful practice rather than mere repetition (Domoney & Harris, 1993; Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988; Graham, 1978; Jedynek, Simpson, & Stieve 2000; Richards, 1969).

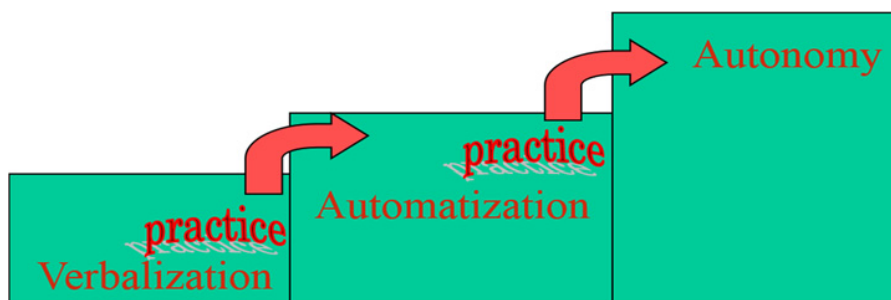


Fig. 1. Progression in skills development (Based on Ur, 1996)

*Linguistically*, too, songs lend themselves as useful tools for classroom use. One of the characteristics of lyrics of songs is that they appear to encompass considerable lexical and grammatical repetitions. A brief examination of an excerpt from the lyrics in the famous award winning song “What if God is one of us” by Joan Osborne (1995) below (Figure 2) will illustrate the repetitiveness in lyrics. The lyrics of the song clearly demonstrate frequent use of second conditionals and can lend itself usefully as a classroom material. Such repetitiveness can provide students with opportunities to get meaningful and frequent exposure to linguistic input necessary for language learning (Rivers, 1981; Sariçoban & Metin, 2000), through which new lexical and grammatical foundations may emerge in our developmental grammar (For further details see Ellis, 2002; Robinson & Ellis, 2007).

Table 1. An excerpt from “What if god is one of us” Joan Osborne (1995)

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If God had a name what would it be?
And would you call it to His face?
If you were faced with Him in all His glory
What would you ask if you had just one question?
...
If God had a face
What would it look like?
And would you want to see
If seeing meant that you would have to believe
In things like Heaven and Jesus and the Saints
And all the Prophets

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### 1.2. Karaoke and necessary equipment

Karaoke is originally a popular pastime in the Orient. Originated from a Japanese context, the word karaoke is a compound word derived from the words *karappo* (*empty*) and *okesutura* (*orchestra*), roughly meaning hands-free orchestra. It is primarily a singing activity whereby the karaoke singer is expected to perform a song as the lyrics run at the bottom of the screen. As the melody progresses, the lyrics are highlighted synchronously. The karaoke singer is to sing the highlighted lyrics conforming to the speed and rhythm of the melody. This is illustrated in Figure 2 on lyrics from Boney M.’s famous 1976 song Daddy Cool. Karaoke singing can be performed on a computer, a VCD/DVD player, or special karaoke machines. It can be done solo, in pairs or more.



Figure 2. Karaoke screen view

Karaoke is primarily an electronic activity. It is necessary to have a PC, VCD/DVD player with karaoke function or a specially designed Karaoke Machine that are commercially available in the market. A number of both commercial and freeware karaoke players are available for use on a personal computer. Some of the popular programs include *VanBasco's Karaoke Player* (<http://www.vanbasco.com/karaokeplayer/>), *KaraFun Karaoke*

*Player* (<http://www.karafun.com/>), and *Karaoke 5* (<http://www.karaoke5.com/>). These freeware programs can be freely downloaded and conveniently used in ELT classes. Karaoke apps are also available (e.g. KaraFun Karaoke player also offers an app for personal use on smart phones.).

Karaoke songs are formatted in a number of different ways. VanBasco's Karaoke Player, for example, plays Karaoke (.kar) and standard MIDI (.mid, .midi, .rmi) files while Karafun Karaoke player can also play MP3 files and other standard MIDI files. Karaoke songs are available online both commercially and as freely downloadable products. Karaoke songs can also be found easily on Youtube in video formats already uploaded by other users. Youtube videos can be downloaded with a Youtube downloader program onto your personal computer. Other sites that offer karaoke songs include <http://www.karasongs.com/>, <http://www.vanbasco.com/midisearch.html>, <http://www.thekaraokechannel.com/online>), and <http://www.redkaraoke.com/>.

Karaoke involves singing along the melody and reading the lyrics running on the screen while the audience listens to the performance. Karaoke singing, therefore, requires a screen (a television, PC monitor or data show projector) to view the lyrics to be sung. For personal use a small screen can suffice. However, a larger screen (e.g. a projector screen or large screen TV unit) may be necessary for class use. Good quality sound output can add to the quality of karaoke experience although in small classes even portable speakers can be good enough. A microphone is desirable for the best effect. This is because, a microphone is helpful to create the sense of real singing and helps singers feel more relaxed. It also gives singers (i.e. language learners) the opportunity to hear themselves through the speakers or sometimes over headphones.

### *1.3. Rationale for using karaoke in ELT classes*

The rationale behind using karaoke in ELT classes is not completely different from using songs and lyrics. Karaoke is not an alternative but an extension of resorting to songs and lyrics as classroom materials. To this end, karaoke can be supplementary to using lyrics.

Karaoke as a pastime activity involves singing, which itself entails articulation of language. Therefore, it may lend itself as an activity that aims at language practice. Singing often reflects our emotions and is part of our personal life. Therefore, experience of karaoke singing is likely to generate opportunities for meaningful language practice, which is often proposed to be one of the key ingredients of and requirements for the development of both receptive and productive language skills (Anderson, 1985; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Ur, 1996). It can be especially useful for the development of language learners' competence through repetitive exposure to language items as well as improvement of their fluency by means of meaningful practice through singing.

Karaoke involves simulating and imitating original recorded voice of popular songs. When singing, karaoke singers try to sound like the original as much as possible. Thus, karaoke singing can provide for meaningful practice required for the development of language learners' pronunciation (Renfigo, 2009). Further, as songs often represent different genres and dialects/accents of a language, karaoke singing can prove to be a useful tool for accent training.

Singing a song in the classroom is likely to contribute to the development of different types of knowledge. As part of our cultural capital, songs can be instrumental for the development of language learners' cultural awareness (Griffe, 1992; Lems, 2001) and add to learners' intercultural competence.

Limited studies that have looked at the use of karaoke for pedagogical purposes often report that the activity is well received by the language learners and is perceived to help students improve their English (Renfigo, 2009). Karaoke, for example, was found to be a useful tool for orienting new college students to the university (Baker, 2012). In another study, karaoke was argued to be a highly valuable tool for music education (Wagner & Brick, 1993). With specific reference to language development, karaoke did have a motivating effect in reading classes with young learners (Gupta, 2006), and frequent use of karaoke in classes resulted in improvements in reading comprehension of special need students (McGall, 2008). Further, Renfigo (2009) also reported in a piece of action research from her classes positive effects of using karaoke on her student pronunciation.

Despite such a promising outlook, opportunities, and prospects karaoke affords for language teaching and learning, it has unfortunately remained underused in ELT classes. This may be probably because of the possibility that there has not been an attempt to highlight principles of use of Karaoke in the class for language teaching purposes. A brief survey conducted for this paper failed to identify any theoretical discussions of how to use karaoke

in the classroom. In the rest of this paper, some guidelines of use will be offered. I do hope that such theorization may attract practitioners' attention and encourage studies to support or falsify suggestions made in this paper.

## 2. Principles of using karaoke in ELT classes

My experience with using karaoke as a tool in the class has underlined three main points we need to take into account. These are familiarity, individual differences and encouragement, and pedagogical objectives. Firstly, students and teachers alike need to be acquainted with the song. Students who are unfamiliar with the classroom song chosen for karaoke singing may and do feel reluctant to take part in karaoke signing. Therefore, choosing songs that students know can exert a positive impact on the effective use of karaoke in the class. Alternatively, teachers may employ activities that aim at familiarizing learners with the song.

Secondly, some students may need a positive environment to participate in karaoke activities. Individuals are not always equally courageous to sing aloud publicly as they may often exhibit varying levels of self-confidence about their voice and singing skills. Further, singing can also be an anxiety provoking activity. Students, therefore, may need as much encouragement as they can get from the environment. They may need to feel the cordiality that welcomes all with no mocking or making fun of language learners with relatively lower levels of singing skills. To this end, teachers are advised to invest time and effort on creating a humanistic environment. As also reported by Renfigo (2009), teachers may need to sing prior to everyone else in the classroom. This is mainly because students appear to enjoy watching their teachers singing no matter how bad their voice and singing skills could be.

Thirdly, karaoke singing done in the class takes up valuable class-time. Therefore use of karaoke in the language class needs to be cost-effective in terms of learning outcomes. Songs chosen for in-class karaoke singing need to be motivating as well as being complementary to the objectives of the unit of instruction. Selection of songs, then, needs to be informed by an initial examination of lyrics for their pedagogical suitability for objectives of the lesson.

Informed by the above principles, a karaoke class can be organized into a multi-stage class format. These different stages can be labeled as familiarization, involvement, and production.

### 2.1. Familiarization

As stated above, one of the facilitating factors on successful karaoke singing as an effective productive language practice is acquaintance with the song. As such, familiarity with both the lyrics and the melody appear to promote students' participation in karaoke singing. To do this, some listening activities can be designed. These may include pre-listening activities (i.e. talking about the singer, story of the song, cultural context etc.); using the song as background music; listening to the song. Students may be asked to work on the lyrics through activities such as listen and fill in the blanks; dictation; and listen and put the lines in correct order.

Example Activity 1: Listen to the song (Tears in Heaven) and fill in the blanks with words you hear in the song.

Would you know my name  
 If I \_\_\_\_\_ you in heaven?  
 Would it be the \_\_\_\_\_  
 If I saw you in heaven?  
 I must be strong and \_\_\_\_\_  
 'Cause I know  
 I don't \_\_\_\_\_ here in heaven.

Example Activity 2: Examine the lines (Tears in Heaven) and number them in the order you hear them.

( ) Would it be the same  
 If I saw you in heaven?  
 ( ) Would you know my name  
 If I saw you in heaven?

I must be strong and carry on  
 ‘Cause I know  
 ( ) I don’t belong here in heaven.

## 2.2. Involvement

It is best when fun and learning accompany one another (Renfigo, 2009). In that sense, language activities related to or independent of the song can be designed to promote learning during the karaoke activity. Such activities may include listening and reading activities (e.g. comprehension checks via true-false items or multiple choice questions); pronunciation practice activities; and vocabulary and grammar activities.

Example Activity 3: Based on lexis taken from Tears in heaven by Eric Clapton, this semi-controlled fill in the blanks activity requires students to place in suitable sentences.

Fill in the blanks. Use *bring down, break, bend, carry on, bend*.

Be careful! You may \_\_\_\_\_ his heart if you behave like this.  
 We cannot give up now. We must \_\_\_\_\_ whatever happens.  
 Look at the colours of those pieces. I don’t think this piece \_\_\_\_\_ here.  
 Such problems can \_\_\_\_\_ your knees but you must try to be strong.  
 The cold weather \_\_\_\_\_ him \_\_\_\_\_ quite easily.

Example activity 4: Based on repetitive use of second conditionals in Tears in heaven by Eric Clapton, this grammar activity asks students to detect any mistakes in verb forms in given sentences and correct if any.

Correct the mistakes (if any) in the following sentences.

Would you lend me some money if you *have* two million dollars?  
 Would your girlfriend be happy if you *gave* her a kiss?  
 I wouldn’t worry so much if I *know* you would be late.  
 She would be able to send the application form in time if she *wake up* early.

## 2.3. Production

Once students feel more acquainted with the class song, the class can proceed to karaoke singing. My personal experience has shown that it may be best to start the karaoke activity with chorus singing, preferably led by the teacher, as such practice can provide students with a relatively safer start. This is mainly because some students quite often may feel timid and less confident to do solo singing in front of others. To reduce the level of anxiety, it is recommended to use recorded voice along with the soundtrack. As Wagner and Brick (1993) quite rightly put in their music education context, “recorded voice serves as a model for students to emulate vocally. When the students are sure of themselves, the recorded voice can be removed” (p. 46).

Repetitive singing of the same song may sometimes cause loss of novelty in songs. To promote further practice, teachers may try group karaoke contest during which an independent group of students may act as the jury and select good performances by various groups (if not the best one). The sense of competition among teams may have a motivating effect on students to pay closer attention to approximate their language performance to the original recorded voice.

The productions stage can involve both fun and further meaningful practice. Karaoke signing may be expanded and integrated into group or personal fine arts projects. Students can be invited to complete group projects in which, for example, they can do role play and drama activities based on the main story of the song. The karaoke activity can be transformed into a creative writing activity in that students may be encouraged to write a story for the song.

Karaoke singing can afford opportunities for real-life like language practice. One such opportunity may involve an expansion of the karaoke singing into clips-shooting activity. In today's world many students possess smartphones with built-in cameras. Students can be encouraged to sing and shoot their own clips for the class song. Rehearsals for performing and shooting the clips may promote creativity and satisfaction they may get from their experience. Such activities are also likely to reinforce the didactic effects of the karaoke singing (Domoney & Harris, 1993; Graham, 1978; Gathbonton & Segalowitz, 1988; Jedynak, 2000; Richards, 1969).

Karaoke singing and studying the lyrics of a song can lead to other language activities that predominantly involve the production of the target language. Students may be invited to add new lines to the song and sing it along the original soundtrack as if they belong to the song. They can write a critique of their own or the singer's performance. For further ideas, the readers are recommended to examine ideas proposed in the literature as per using songs and lyrics (e.g. Eken, 1996; Griffee, 1992; Murphey, 1992).

### 3. Conclusion

This paper identified karaoke singing as a useful tool in ELT classes. Although songs and lyrics have long been in use by language teachers, karaoke as a classroom activity has remained underexplored and underused in language classes. Studies that looked into the use of karaoke appear to produce promising outcomes. However, the lack of theoretical foundations and pedagogical implications fails to offer practicing teachers ideas and suggestions on how to make the best of karaoke and karaoke singing in ELT classes.

This paper highlighted some principles to follow when using karaoke and suggested different stages that can be followed. It appears karaoke singing can be effectively done in the class when students are acquainted with the class song. Therefore, teachers are advised to aim at familiarizing their students with the karaoke song. Karaoke singing may sometimes be perceived as face-threatening activity with pressure from their peers. Therefore a welcoming environment may need to be created by the teacher. This paper also highlighted the need for selecting and using songs both for entertainment and learning simultaneously. Activities will best serve the teacher and students if they are aligned to learning objectives of the language programme.

To summarize, karaoke singing is not only about singing, it does entail involvement of essential language skills and sub-skills. It can therefore contribute to the development of such language knowledge through carefully selected songs and activities. However, I feel the need to express a word of caution. Although I do believe in the benefits of activities I have endeavored to outline here, activities and procedures I described here unfortunately are not data driven. They often reflect my own experience as a class teacher and an occasional karaoke singer. Therefore, I would like to invite researchers and teachers to test ideas presented here. It is only then we can develop a proper understanding and appreciation of the full potential of karaoke singing for language learning purposes.

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