



# Learning to a Beat

*Susanna Zaraysky* offers practical ways to incorporate music into any language classroom

**Have you ever heard a song on the radio** that you haven't heard in a decade and you surprise yourself by singing all the lyrics?

Music and catchy jingles can stick in our minds for years while names of people, places, verb conjugation charts and memorized data disappear.

Do you think your students would remember the Spanish imperfect subjunctive better if you had them memorize the line "Como si fuera la ultima vez" (As though this were our last night) from the song *Bésame Mucho* and other verses with the uses of the imperfect subjunctive?

We're missing the beat. We need to add music and other media into language education to help our students get into the rhythm of their target language and have fun. We're

teaching to the iTunes generation and we need to get on their wavelength.

If the students' parents think that music is silly, just tell them that their kids are more likely to retain information in a song than by memorization. Convince the parents, entertain the students, and you will have a happy classroom.

Not only is music a key instructional tool for memorizing words and grammatical patterns, but it helps students get used to the sounds of the language and improve their accents. If we start them off with vocabulary and grammar without paying attention to accents and pronunciation, they may spend inordinate amounts of time studiously learning grammar only to find themselves with accents that native speakers can barely

understand. Stressing good pronunciation from the onset is key.

Would you start to play the violin before hearing what violin music sounds like? Most likely not. Language learners need to get used to the musicality of a language before they can imitate its sounds. Remember that as children we first learn to make sounds and then words. Babies and toddlers listen to language before they say their first words at the age of one or so. They hear first, then they speak. Get your students to first listen to the language and enjoy its sounds and then give them the hard stuff.

Starting to learn a language with grammar is like teaching a kid music theory before letting the child listen to songs and actually enjoy or get used to the melodies. Boring. A

child wants to play a harmonica or sing along to a song and not learn about minor and major chords. Even as adults, we are lured by fun. Let's face it, who wants to start learning a language with grammar? Most of us learn to communicate. To talk, we need to pronounce words. Your students need to feel how the language sounds. They will be more interested in perfecting their grammar if they actually like the language. So ease them into grammar by first enticing them with the musicality of the language.

Our minds are like sponges; they will absorb more when they are open and ready to take in information, not when they are contracted and stressed.

## Steps to Using Music in Class

### Use these tips to relax your students

and get them excited about learning their target language. You can also have your students listen to music at home and follow these guidelines.

#### 1. Tune your ears

Help your students to take in the sounds of the language as though they were listening to a new piece of music. Remind your students that even if they are just beginners and barely know any foreign words, they can still learn by listening. Sometimes, we have to shut off our brain and its inclination to interpret and analyze. Tell them to listen to the words spoken and listen to their intuition.

#### 2. Mozart to the rescue!

"You cannot reproduce a sound you cannot hear." — Alfred Tomatis, French ear specialist and creator of the Tomatis method for language acquisition and speech therapy.

Alfred Tomatis founded a therapy program to train ears to hear sounds they couldn't previously. Tomatis discovered that the reason people have accents in other languages and have trouble replicating sounds is that they simply don't hear the sounds of the other language correctly. Their ears have grown accustomed to processing sounds from their mother tongue. Tomatis created a training program with an electronic ear that filtered new sounds

to the ear in order to train ear muscles to react and process new sounds. He also encouraged his patients to listen to the music of Amadeus Mozart because the music had a wide range of low and high pitched frequencies. Researchers studying the "Mozart effect" played Mozart's Piano Sonata in D major (K.448) for their subjects to see if listening to the music stimulated the brain. Some studies show that people became temporarily more intelligent after listening to the music and could concentrate better. Whether or not you agree with Tomatis' theories, encouraging your students to listen to classical music regularly to calm their bodies and minds and sharpen their ears may help them with language lessons and conversation practice.

#### 3. Read and listen between the lines

My voice teacher told me singing was not about the notes themselves, but about the distances and relationships between the notes. When your students are listening to their target language, they should pay attention to the range of sounds in a given word or sentence. Are many of the sounds similar to each other? Do they like how soft vowels sound next to hard consonants?

As an example, the French language has many words beginning and ending with vowels and some phrases can be hard to decipher for beginners. French speakers pronounce their multi-vowel words in a legato form, connecting all the vowel sounds.

Train your students to listen carefully. Read sentences aloud. Have students compete to see who can distinguish two separate words in a phrase where one word ends in a vowel and another one begins with a vowel. Students raise their hands when they hear the end of the word.

#### 4. Length and melody

The length and melody of languages vary considerably and a foreign speaker has to literally get into the rhythm of the tongue to correctly create phrases. Pronouncing a word with a short vowel instead of a long vowel can completely change the meaning of the word. The same is true in music. If you hold a note longer than you should or play a staccato instead of a whole note, you are altering the

music and may make the piece of music sound wrong. When your students can distinguish long vowels from short vowels or monosyllabic sounds from polysyllabic sounds, they are more likely to pronounce the words with the right length and melody.

Find songs with verses containing words of various lengths and get your students to memorize those lines to ingrain the length and melody of the language.

#### 5. Emphasis

Where is the emphasis in the word? Many times people mispronounce words in another language because they accent or emphasize the right part of the word. Hungarian, though extremely complicated grammatically, is easy to pronounce. The emphasis is on the first syllable of the word. Always. Sentences in Hungarian always have a predictable sound. The emphasis will never be on the last syllable of the last word, as may happen in other languages when someone is trying to stress something in particular.

Ask students to close their eyes as they listen to you pronounce words. Make them raise their hands when they hear the emphasis in the words.

#### 6. Relax and listen to music in the language you are learning

Have your class find music in their target language that they like. It doesn't matter if, at first, they don't understand the lyrics. Have them pick music that they like. They may start singing along without even knowing what they are singing. That's fine. They are not only learning the rhythm of the language, they are learning new vocabulary.

Turn off the lights and tell your students to close their eyes. They can lay down or sit in a comfortable position. Play popular and easy-to-understand songs. Tell your students not to try to understand the words, just listen. They might fall asleep or day dream. Encourage them to give themselves the time to simply listen and not do anything else. Their mind needs to be calm in order to absorb the sounds. Their ears need no other distractions to let them properly hear all the high, medium and low frequencies of the language. Make this a regular classroom activity.



## Methodology

### 7. Listen to the music in the background

Have your students turn on music in their target language while driving, doing household chores, cooking, gardening, etc. Even if they are just passively listening to the music, the rhythms of the language will become more familiar to them. Exposure is key.

### 8. Write down the lyrics as you listen

Instruct your students to try to listen to music with the lights on, their eyes open and a pencil in hand. Students write the lyrics of the songs while listening. You will have to pause the music and rewind many times for them to get the words down. Some words will be hard to write because they may be idioms or slang that they haven't learned yet. However, have them just write as much as they can understand. Remember that songwriters sometimes employ rarely used words just to make the song rhyme. They often play word games and compose their lyrics with words that sound alike or may even be

spelled the same way, but have different meanings. Tell them not to be frustrated with obscure words. Compare the lyrics they noted with the original song and see how well they were able to understand the song. Some CDs come with the lyrics inside the CD case. If they don't have them, they can look for them online.

Once your students have their version of the lyrics and the original, they can see how much they were able to understand from listening to the song. Have them use a dictionary to translate the words they do not know.

If they can't locate the lyrics online, they should type in the name of the song in quotes in a web search.

### 9. Recognize grammatical patterns and conjugations in the lyrics

By paying attention not only to the content of the songs, but also the structure of the sentences, your students will begin to recognize grammatical patterns.

Is the song in present or future tense, or past tense? Is the singer speaking in the subjunctive? Irregular verb patterns are easier to understand when you can hear them in context.

If they don't recognize some of the conjugations, have them look up the root verb in a verb conjugation chart to figure out which tense the verb is in. Keep in mind that when irregular verbs are conjugated, they may not at all look like their root.

### 10. Make a vocabulary list with words from the songs

To visually reinforce what your students are learning from listening to music, have them write vocabulary words from the songs they are learning on flash cards or pieces of paper. On one side, they write the word in English and on the other side, they write it in the target language. If they study one song a week and reinforce their learning by practicing the vocabulary with flash cards, they will quickly learn new words and enjoy themselves along the way.

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### 11. Imagine the lyrics in your head

Explain to your class that if the song is a story, they should close their eyes as they hear the music and think of what the songwriter is talking about. Tell them to create the story in their minds as they listen. They'll retain the words from the songs better than by just memorizing them from a vocabulary chart.

### 12. Draw pictures of the story

After imagining the story described in the song, have your students draw the story. By utilizing their drawing skills, they will be fortifying the song in their mind. Visual reinforcement is important in making the words of the song become real to them.

### 13. Listen to the music in your head

Finally, tell your class that when they hear songs in their heads, they usually hear the music in its original form, without any accent. Have them relax, close their eyes, and play the song in their mind. They can be their own stereo. They are now letting their brain get

used to the sounds of the language and recreating it in their mind before they try to sing it themselves. Singers hear the notes in their brains before they open their mouths and sing.

### 14. Sing. Karaoke your way to fluency

Video a karaoke contest in class. Rate the student videos based on pronunciation, dramatization, and creativity.

### 15. Sing at home with a recorder

For those students who are not keen on singing in the classroom version of American Idol, assign them singing homework. They will use a voice recorder (tape or digital) or use a recording program on their computer to record themselves crooning the assigned tunes. Their assignment is to compare their sound to the originals. This will help them hear how their melody compares to that of a native speaker. When they continue listening to the original songs, they will see that the more they listen and practice singing, the closer they sound to the original. **IX**

### Resources

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**Susanna Zaraysky** is the author of *Language is Music: Over 70 Fun & Easy Tips to Learn Foreign Languages*. She studied ten languages and speaks seven (Russian, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Serbo-Croatian). The book has been featured on MTV online as a resource for language learning. She has given presentations about her book at the State and Defense Departments, to audiences in Qatar and Thailand and at Stanford, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of San Francisco and San Jose State University. For further information, visit [www.languageismusic.com](http://www.languageismusic.com).

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