

Jazz chants

Scott Gross finds that communal chanting strikes a chord in Vietnam.

As I heard the clapping and the chanting, I realised that students in Vietnam feel right at home with jazz chants. This surprised me, because my experience with jazz chants (such as those created by Carolyn Graham) in North America is that they are only for those extravert, enthusiastic and artsy teachers who think it is fun to take students out of their comfort zone. However, in Vietnam it appears that jazz chants fit perfectly into a communal or group-oriented culture.

As Jean Engler points out, jazz chants are wonderful at helping students to become aware of the stress-timed rhythmic patterns of English, which are often quite different from the syllable-timed patterns of many world languages, including Vietnamese. Furthermore, according to John Murphy, they are a great way to integrate listening, speaking and pronunciation skills in one lesson. For students with fossilised pronunciation, William Acton finds that performing jazz chants with a teacher can be quite beneficial for mirroring the facial and body movements of a speaker, in order to capture important supra-segmental and intonation patterns. For all these reasons, jazz chants are not just fun and appealing to auditory and kinaesthetic learners, but they are also efficient in merging the practice of many oral skills.

The case for the effectiveness of jazz chants from a pedagogical standpoint is substantial. Even though they are considered somewhat 'artistic' in ELT methodology, they are actually closer to the cultural characteristics found in many Asian classrooms.

Language teaching techniques in Vietnam have often been judged harshly as being, in the words of Le Ha Phan, 'deficient and imposing, didactic and backward' when compared with Western language teaching methods, notably communicative language teaching. On the surface, there are many things about the

Vietnamese classroom that do not mix well with many of the teaching methods coming from the West. Communicative language teaching emphasises communication that promotes fluency and active participation, with the teacher taking the role of a facilitator. The challenge for English teachers from the West and Vietnamese teachers who wish to employ more communicative methods is how to utilise the strengths and characteristics of the traditional Vietnamese classroom, in order for students to experience language learning in a way that resonates with them culturally. The wonderful quality of jazz chants is that they fit quite easily into the cultural landscape of the Vietnamese classroom. The congruence is manifested in the importance of memorisation, teacher-centred learning, a tight classroom community, and a high value placed on music and poetry.

A cultural match

Vietnamese students are very good at memorising. From primary school straight through university, they use memorisation as a tool for retaining very specific information related to their subjects. In language classrooms, students memorise grammar rules and important linguistic structures. When faced with teaching methods that emphasise free speaking and oral fluency, Vietnamese students can feel quite disoriented. Students with Western teachers who favour extemporaneous speaking rarely hear the same forms repeated. As a result, they have difficulty knowing what the best form is and whether they should memorise it. The great advantage of jazz chants is that they present a series of phrases that are *meant* to be memorised. In fact, the words are not just meant to be *memorised*, they are meant to be completely *mimicked* from the individual sound level to the sentence level.

Teacher-centred education in Vietnam is manifested in the almost universal use of the lecture technique in schools. Dialogue and input from students is almost nonexistent. In defence of the value of Vietnamese traditional education, Le Ha Phan points out that the classroom in Vietnam 'is often like a family in which the sense of supportiveness, politeness and warmth both inside and outside the classroom is obvious'. The result of this is that many students are willing to take risks as a group, though, individually, they are quite reluctant to step out of the group. In a collectivist culture such as that of Vietnam, it is important to use the concept of community, instead of fighting to swim upstream by forcing the students to participate in ways that make them stand out.

Jazz chants are teacher-centred in that the teacher introduces the chant, performs it as an example and then invites the students to try it, while maintaining the role as the 'chant leader'. In this way, all the students can actively participate without losing the dynamic of a teacher-centred lesson. Jazz chants invite students in collectivist classrooms to take risks that they would normally not take individually. They allow for active participation in groups – even if the action itself is a little bizarre.

I have found that getting the students to clap, stamp their feet, snap their fingers and chant works well in Vietnamese classes, since they are accomplishing something as a unit and there is a sense of community. The experience chimes with a Vietnamese proverb that roughly translates to 'a single tree on a hillside is alone, but three trees are a forest'.

Music and movement

The value that Vietnamese people place on the musical and bodily-kinaesthetic intelligences can be seen in the emphasis placed on performing songs and dances at many occasions during the academic year, right from primary school up to university. This is also not something reserved for those few who can do it really well – it is expected from all members of a group, and high value is placed on its role in solidifying community and family relationships. A whole class of students may perform a song publicly as a group, though only two of them are actually given microphones to sing into. Jazz chants relate well to this emphasis on

musical and bodily-kinaesthetic intelligences since they involve music in terms of rhythm, and physical movements are employed to express that rhythm.

Vietnam has a rich oral tradition and there is great interest in poetry. As Claire Kramersch and Patricia Sullivan have found, oral communication in Vietnam 'abounds with proverbs, sayings and poetic allusions'. Students also enjoy the use of word play, experimenting with different tones and syntax in order to make creative expressions and jokes. Puns have an auditory element because Vietnamese is a tonal language. This interest in poetry and word play connects well to jazz chants, which are an interesting genre of poetry with an important auditory element.

In addition, my students are not only interested in learning jazz chants but, more importantly, they are keen to perform them well. This is something that lies at the heart of jazz chants, because the oral repetition of them solidifies the correct pronunciation. Since Vietnamese students are used to learning English through drills and repetition, I have found that they have an excellent tolerance for repeating a jazz chant multiple times in one lesson.


Harmonising traditional and modern

Brian Tomlinson and Bao Dat conducted a study of university English students in Ho Chi Minh City in 2004 and found that classroom harmony leads to students wanting to participate actively. They went on to point out that choral response 'allowed students to participate securely'. One of Tomlinson and Dat's conclusions was that Vietnamese learners need to 'reduce their performance anxiety'. They also deduced that 'classroom methodology should reflect the students' preference for "a family style"'. Since jazz chants are performed as a class or in large groups, the students are able to participate in an environment that reduces potential anxiety over losing face and being put on the spot. Tomlinson and Dat observed that Vietnamese students need 'more culturally sensitive pedagogy as a vehicle to transfer culturally appropriate subject matter'. I see jazz chants as an example of the type of culturally sensitive pedagogy that can be used in Vietnamese classrooms.

I find that differences in culture are often first understood as being 'right' or

'wrong'. I feel that this tendency is evident in the university setting in Vietnam. One side wants to show how the tried and trusted traditional ways of doing things are still useful. The other side wants to show how new and different methods can achieve better results. These debates are quite emotionally charged, and people find themselves defending generations and hemispheres. Le Ha Phan represents the voice of reason when she asserts that 'what one culture values should not result in devaluing other cultural practices, which may present similar qualities in different ways'. I believe that all teachers need to acknowledge the context that students come from, and to think about what approach would best build on the place where the students already are.



In the end, the point is not necessarily that jazz chants are the 'be all and end all' of merging communicative language teaching and traditional East Asian pedagogy. They do, however, fit nicely into the traditional educational culture of the East, even as they are a progressively creative method coming from the West. 

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