Meaning in sound

Charles Goodger
shows how action songs, TPR and PMA turn English into music.

Music, memory and meaning in sound come together in the FunSongs Method to create a joyful way of teaching English that aligns closely with what is now known about the brain and language learning. Drawing on James J. Asher's (2000) pioneering Total Physical Response (TPR) and Noam Chomsky's (1957) insight that language internalisation develops in a natural physiological order – first understanding then speaking – the approach places melody, movement and narrative at the heart of language learning. Action songs can be so much more than a light-weight interlude at the end of a unit or module. In the right hands they are a powerful 'engine' of presentation in which Permanent Memory Acquisition (PMA), intelligible pronunciation and affective creative engagement in the classroom are rewarded with accelerated learning.

My research shows that children who have learnt language chunks through such modules tend not to forget them, especially when teachers then 'smash the clay pot' of the song by recycling its language through mime games, worksheets and role plays.

Asher's TPR and physiological chronology

The FunSongs Method openly acknowledges its debt to Professor James J. Asher, whose Total Physical Response method revolutionised thinking about how beginners can internalise language through listening and coordinated action. Asher's classic classroom command sequences – 'Stand up, clap your hands five times, then sit down' – embody the principle that understanding must come before production, and that movement anchored to comprehensible input accelerates acquisition. I have wholeheartedly embraced Asher's insistence on a natural physiological chronology of skills: first listening and understanding, then speaking (or singing). Only afterwards, must the 'artificial' school skills of reading and writing be directly taught. In practical terms, this means that in the FunSongs classroom the written lyrics of an action song are deliberately withheld until the class can perform it confidently from memory, forcing learners to build a robust aural-oral map of the new language before they encounter its often irregular spelling.

Meaning in sound

My work starts from a simple but profound question: how does the ear turn sound into meaning? If the human brain processes running water, a train in the distance, a familiar voice and a beloved tune through similar mechanisms, music and language clearly share key features of sequence, rhythm, stress and intonation. Just as changing the order of notes destroys the recognisability of a melody, disturbing the sequence of phonemes compromises intelligibility; meaning in sound depends on patterns the brain can predict and enjoy. This close parallel between notes and phonemes is what allows melody to become a kind of 'carrier wave' for language, with rhythm and contour helping learners segment, store and later retrieve multiword chunks. The FunSongs materials explicitly exploit this by embedding lexical sets and grammatical structures in strong, 'earworm' tunes that students want to sing again and again.

PMA: Permanent Memory Acquisition

I coined the term PMA – Permanent Memory Acquisition – to describe what happens when music, mime, rhythm and rhyme are combined in a well-designed classroom action song. In cognitive terms, several intelligences and both brain hemispheres are activated at the same time: musical, kinaesthetic, linguistic and visual, supported by emotional and social engagement. When children learn vocabulary through a song such as 'Time to Play' or 'The Monster March', the words are 'poured into' a melodic and motor sequence that the brain can replay with little effort, long after the lesson has finished.

dance moves that will later become the learners' own choreographed performance.

3. **Teach** the song in short chunks using a 'two steps forward, one step back' cycle, combining clear enunciation with symbolic gestures and insisting on meaningful repetition without resorting to translation unless absolutely necessary.
4. **Recycling**. Once PMA has been reached and the song can be performed confidently without the guide voice, the teacher then focuses on worksheet-based and game-based recycling, so that vocabulary and structures intrinsic or implied in the action song start to enter personal communicative use.

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Yet beneath the laughter and smiles lies a rigorous approach to input, rehearsal and form focus. Because a song simply 'doesn't work' if stress, rhythm and vowel quality are wrong, children are naturally pushed towards intelligible pronunciation and accurate chunking without the need for overt correction drills. Teachers report that even slower learners experience a strong sense of achievement when they can perform an entire song in English on stage, which in turn improves their attitude to language learning in general.

Pronunciation and intelligibility through song

Pronunciation is one area where the coupling of melody and language yields particularly clear gains. In English, where orthography is famously irregular, teaching new words through their written forms can lock in faulty sound-spelling associations; by postponing print, the FunSongs Method encourages learners to build an accurate phonological representation first. Singing forces attention to syllable timing, stress patterns and intonation contours, turning abstract features like weak forms and sentence stress into physical habits in the mouth and breath.

Moreover, repeating a musical phrase hundreds of times is socially acceptable and enjoyable, whereas repeating a bare sentence the same number

Each downloadable pack includes graded worksheets, teacher notes and teaching-action videos, allowing teachers to integrate the module into cross-curricular projects involving science, geography, social studies or art. This modular design means that a teacher can, for example, use an action song on climate change as the emotional and linguistic 'spine' of a CLIL unit, with follow-up tasks in reading and writing that grow organically out of the sung text.

Music, movement and multiple intellig ences

My approach resonates strongly with Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, which he explicitly cites and discusses in his methodological guide. By uniting melody, gesture, spatial awareness, visual imagery and language, an action song simultaneously engages musical, bodily kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and linguistic intelligences – a richer profile than traditional coursebook-based tasks.

Working with whole classes standing in lines or circles, responding to cues and collaborating in performance also strengthens classroom cohesion and peer support, which in turn reduces anxiety and creates more favourable conditions for risk-taking in L2. The result is an affectively warm environment where serious language work is done under the banner of play and artistry, rather than compulsion. To quote Mario Rinvolucri, who was a believer in the FunSongs Method:

> In the action song classroom, the learner is aware of enjoying himself and having fun. At an unconscious level the language patterns and regularities are being efficiently absorbed by the learner's mind for later free use. FunSongs is whole body and whole brain learning in which the learner perceives him/herself as doing, rather than being done to.
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> – Mario Rinvolucri (2005)

Towards a richer soundscape in language teaching

For language teachers used to linear coursebooks and digital platforms, the FunSongs Method offers a reminder that language is, like music, organised sound in time. By honouring the natural order of skills described by Asher and others, and by using music as a delivery system for comprehensible, memorable input, it is possible to accelerate vocabulary growth, stabilise grammar chunks and build intelligible pronunciation while keeping the classroom alive with movement and story.

Teachers and schools interested in exploring this approach can download complete action song packs – including an in-audio guide (presentation) and performance versions, worksheets, teacher notes and full teaching-action videos – directly from the FunSongs website at funsongs.co.uk, where licences allow broad use across classes and school programmes.

References

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Charles Goodger is a British educator, composer and university professor, best known as founder of FunSongs Education and creator of the FunSongs Method. In 2000, he launched FunSongs Education Ltd to make English learning enjoyable and memorable through original and highly catchy action songs. As adjunct professor and teacher trainer at the University of Bologna's Faculty of Education, he shares his innovative approach to combining melody, rhythm and movement to boost language acquisition. He has also composed songs for world famous singers such as Marina Rebeka and Al Bano.