

The Rhythm of Learning: Why the Shortest Distance Between Cultures is

Tin Pan Alley

By Holly Van Leuven

I

In the fall of 2010, I began teaching my first English as a Second Language (ESL) class. For eight weeks, nine immigrants from Spain and Russia between the ages of forty and eighty joined me in the tiny office of Operation P.E.A.C.E. in Boston. Our textbook was *Steps in Time*, the autobiography of American singing and dancing legend Fred Astaire. For homework, my students read through Astaire's song lyrics. In class, we watched his films. The more my students saw of this cultural genius, the more fluent and eloquent their use of the English talent became to discuss their amazement. How could a man perform like that? they asked, and where did I ever get the idea for this class?

The second question proved easier to answer: The idea for this class came from my own love of Fred Astaire's musicals. His effortless cadence in such routines as "Cheek to Cheek," the incredible lyrical abilities of Irving Berlin, and the beautiful Art Deco sets of Astaire's 1930s musicals at RKO Studios never fail to stimulate my imagination. Watching Astaire's mastery of dance has always inspired me to pursue excellence in my chosen art: creative writing. Who couldn't benefit from watching these timeless films and listening to these masterful songs? I wanted to find out, and so I brought Fred Astaire to students hoping to improve their English.

In the first week of class, my students took turns reading aloud the lyrics of the song, “Cheek to Cheek.” While Irving Berlin’s lyrics are simple and melodious, my intermediate students sought my help in deciphering some of the outdated phrases. We finished the reading and I played the accompanying dance. I can remember worrying as I sat with them and watched Fred sing “Cheek to Cheek” to Ginger Rogers on the screen. I wondered if my students grasp the meaning of the lyrics: “And the cares that hung around me through the week / Seem to vanish like a gambler’s lucky streak / When we’re out together dancing cheek to cheek” (*Top Hat*).

“What was this song and dance about?” I asked the class afterwards.

Milya Gellher, a Russian immigrant who became a Fred Astaire aficionado by the end of our eight weeks together replied: “He loves her from the bottom of his heart. All evil disappears when he is with her. She is the reason he wants to live, the best part of his life.”

My worries vanished like a gambler’s lucky streak.

II

I continued to base class discussions and assignments off of *Steps in Time* and the films of Fred Astaire. In my experiences over eight weeks, students encountered the most difficulty reading the lyrics of Fred Astaire’s songs and deciphering their meaning. However, once they watched Fred Astaire and his beautiful partners perform classic American songs, the English language flowed from their pens and their lips with competency and interest. This leads me to believe that rhyme is an important tool in acquiring a second language. My research has also supported this idea.

Mechthild Cranston, who teaches French to American high school students wrote:

...poetry is indeed “scary” business, difficult gladly to learn and gladly to teach, though not, as commonly held, due to its often arcane language and tortured syntax, but because of its demands on imaginative and affective engagement that, unlike the memorization of irregular verbs, vocabulary lists, and plot summaries, involves risk-taking (954-955).

While a student’s questions about prefixes or suffixes would lead to discussions of grammar and vocabulary, my students learned the most through watching the facial expressions, the gesticulations, and the many words unspoken that run between the lines of Fred Astaire’s lyrics and the measures of his dances. His elegant top hats, Ginger’s dreamy dresses, and the incredible balconies and staircases that set the scene for their most breathtaking numbers open up a comfort zone where students can experiment with and engage in the language they are learning. Cranston also says that, “Kinetic poetry is the easiest to teach and the most readily appreciated, at least on the surface level” (959). What better example of kinetic poetry do we have than the work of Fred Astaire?

In addition to being readily appreciated, kinetic poetry might be the easiest to retain if one considers the work of Reuven Tsur. In “Rhyme and Cognitive Poetics,” Tsur says:

In poetic language, the verbal material is subjected to much more sophisticated processing than in other uses of language. But in at least some instances, rhyme reverberates in echoic memory more intensely and for even longer than most other aspects of poetic language (61-62).

This would explain why words like “gambler,” and “thrill” that initially boggled my students upon reading began to make sense when they heard Fred Astaire sing about them, and also why they were using those words correctly even weeks later in the course while struggling with some words that recurred in the prose of Astaire’s autobiography.

While the lyrics certainly facilitated the students’ learning process, music also plays an important role in learning a second language. Cranston presents this thought-provoking idea: “The auditory sense, put off by foreign sounds, is easily coaxed into engagement by tunes that are familiar” (956). My students brought some knowledge of Fred Astaire with them to my class; they informed me they had seen Fred Astaire’s routines and heard his songs in their native countries, but the performances they witnessed were dubbed. It intrigued them to find out what the lyrics meant in English and also provided them with a new opportunity to relive fond memories of listening to the songs years before. By learning English through the work of Fred Astaire, the path across cultures for my ESL students was a comfortable one.

This concept leads me to comment briefly on James L. Citron’s studies of the theory of ethno-lingual theory. Citron addresses the popularly held belief that foreign languages should be taught to school-aged children who typically are more open-minded than their elders. This, it is believed, will allow them to grow into adults who are more accepting of other cultures than their forebears. However, Citron challenges this belief by reversing it; his studies explore the possibility that those who are accepting of the beliefs and practices of other cultures find it easier to acquire a second language (105).

My own students showed great interest in the American cars, fashions, foods, places, and occupations displayed in Fred Astaire’s musicals, partly at least because of

the influence American culture held over their own countries and their prior exposure to it. However, by laughing at Fred's famous dance with fireworks to celebrate the Fourth of July and marveling as his Christmas dance with partner Virginia Dale (*Holiday Inn*) --- in short, by willingly and joyfully immersing themselves in the customs of a different culture --- the acquisition of the language needed to discuss this new culture seemed to come more easily to the students.

III

M ESL class using the work of Fred Astaire and my subsequent research on the acquisition of language in poetry and rhyme, I am convinced of music's ability not only to help students learn a foreign language but also to embrace new cultures. Further, I believe classic songs from Tin Pan Alley and the American Songbook, such as "Puttin' on the Ritz," "Fascinating Rhythm," "The Way You Look Tonight," and "Pick Yourself Up" are especially helpful in acquiring new languages. These songs radiate the mastery of their brilliant and dedicated writers by promoting hard work, determination, respect, admiration, and the beauty of imagination. They have seen the world through many trying times including war and financial collapse and have infiltrated the globe. Everyone, no matter their age, no matter their nationality, can find beauty and meaning within these powerful and memorable lyrics. My professional experiences also insist I applaud the work of the late Fred Astaire and share with you the abilities his work has to educate us all through its magnanimity. I sincerely believe that music is the pathway to cultural knowledge and, in turn, understanding. More important than their great musicality, the songs performed by Fred Astaire ring with beauty, hope, and respect. And

these elements, before any others, must be conveyed across cultures before we can begin to fully appreciate each other.

Works Cited

- Citron, James L. "Can Cross-Cultural Understanding Aid Second Language Acquisition? Toward a Theory of Ethno-Lingual Relativity." *Hispania* 78.1 (1995): 105-113. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 January 2011.
- Cranston, Mechthild. "Rhyme or Reason? The Teaching of Poetry in the Foreign Language Classroom." *The French Review* 76.5 (2003): 954-966. *JSTOR*. 21 January 2011.
- Holiday Inn*. Dir. Mark Sandrich. Perf. Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, Marjorie Reynolds. Paramount Pictures, 1942. DVD.
- Top Hat*. Dir. Mark Sandrich. Perf. Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Edward Everett Horton. RKO Radio Pictures, 1935. DVD.
- Tsur, Reuven. "Rhyme and Cognitive Poetics." *Poetics Today* 17.1 (1996): 55-87. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 January 2011.

To view a video about this class, please visit:

<http://operationpeaceboston.org/Gallery/Videos.html>