Sing and the world sings with you

Andy Reed finds music hits the right note when teaching young children.

At very short notice I was asked to take up a part-time post at a small private junior school in Germany, near to where I lived. The school had one class of 18 children between the ages of five and nine. The school was very new, the children, all of whom were German, spoke little or no English, and this was to be my principal area of concern. I visited the showrooms of the three major publishers present in the city and looked at the available courses for this age group, some of which were German versions of courses from English publishers. There seemed to be many similarities between the various materials. Most advocated a gentle introduction and the content was generally listed under topics described as relevant to the children's everyday lives, such as food, clothes, family, animals, my body. The only major difference I found was that a few stressed a grammatical approach.

Songs as resources

The school did not have the resources to buy a course and so I planned to cover each topic in turn, in a similar manner to that used by the published versions but without worksheets or students' books. Wherever possible, I used props or objects in preference to pictures as I covered the vocabulary of each topic for the children, and they did their best to learn with me. In addition I used lots of songs. During my childhood and youth I had been a member of two organisations, both of which encouraged a lot of singing, mainly around the campfire. I spent a considerable time trying to remember the songs I had learnt then, and I concentrated on those that I had enjoyed singing between the ages of five and ten. This more or less ruled out nursery content, surprisingly common elsewhere, as I found it old-fashioned and it did not match the intellectual level of children over four.

Songs for imagination

By the end of a period of about three months, I found I had virtually abandoned the topics and I was concentrating on songs. This was not a conscious decision, it just seemed to happen. The lessons went far better with the songs. They seemed to offer many more opportunities for the children's imagination through roleplaying, actions and theatre and they were far more lively and fun than the rather dull topics. The fact that the English was natural and therefore often 'complicated' did not seem to matter, and with the songs all the children were actively singing or speaking.

Songs for homework

It became obvious that a good tune is extremely important. The children also particularly liked the longer songs with a mean storyline or those involving intrigue. However, I became a little concerned as these took quite a long time to learn in class. My solution was to record the songs and issue a CD to each child for use at home. This produced a significant increase in progress. In class we sang and interpreted the songs, but it was disappointing that, at home, the children would only hear the songs without really understanding each sentence. I approached two illustrators, Calle Klaus and Karl Volkmann and we worked together to remedy this.
songs in class. Obviously it was not home and we sang and performed the
They all had the book and the CD at
one hour, in another part of the city.
I was keen to test this out on a new
CD containing eight songs.
A 'picture guidance system' was needed.
corresponded to small pictures at the
bottom right of each illustration. This
indicated to the child when to move to
the next illustration or when to turn
the page. The result of our efforts was
a 'Singing Picture Story Book' with a
CD, the first time with sound effects,
the eighth 'song' was the alphabet) and the
game and dances contained a further 21
words. My additional spoken vocabulary
came to about 40 words for the dances
and 25 words for the game, to which
can be added the sort of sentences
teachers say in class for general
direction and artwork. All the children
sang virtually all the time during the
songs and I know how many words we
used. I could not evaluate how much
the children individually spoke during
the normal run of the lessons and so
took this as zero. The average for the
whole period (seven hours) was 38
spoken words a minute for the children
and, as far as could be seen from the
lessons and their performance, they
understood all the contexts.
You will find an example of one of
our songs on page 25.

More songs
I followed this up with another course
of six weeks of one-hour sessions. The
children received another CD with a
further eight songs but unfortunately
without an accompanying picture book.
We sometimes sang the original eight
songs and, in the time available, covered
six of the new songs well but the other
two hardly at all. The vocabulary, in
addition to that in the first eight songs,
was 242 words, of which 157 words
were in the six songs that were
completely covered. The new
cooperative speaking game involved 20
new words. The third dance did not
really involve any new spoken
vocabulary for the children. In the
second session the children spoke or
sang 35 words a minute on average.
For the two sessions, with a total
contact time of 13 hours, there was a
combined vocabulary for the 14
covered songs, the dances and the
games of 393 words plus the alphabet,
plus my own spoken vocabulary, with
an average of 36 words spoken every
minute by the children. I did contact
some publishers to try to make a
comparison but found it impossible to
obtain suitable information from them.

When songs play an important
supportive role, the children’s progress
is impressive. My second Singing Picture
Story Book with CD will shortly be
ready and includes five songs and five
dialogue jokes for the children, plus an
adult section to give many ideas for
accompanying the items with the
expressive arts. I now have 39 free-flow
Game-Play activities, plenty of
developments for the ‘Storyboard’, lots
of ‘Follow-my-lead’ activities in addition
to the dances and an intuitive approach
for learning to read.
I believe that with two 45-minute
lessons per week for a school year it is
quite easy to cover 1,300 words in
context during the first year of English
in the primary school and set the
children well on the way to
spontaneous conversation.
As a result of many requests at
teacher training sessions, I will be
issuing a handbook containing my ideas
Money, money!

Here is part of a story song from the first eight that I use. Initially I had no CD or book and to teach the children the song and achieve full understanding took over 60 minutes spread over several weeks. The second time I used the song, the children had the CD at home and the lesson time was about 40 minutes. With the illustrated book and CD available at home, less than 20 minutes of lesson time brought us up to group performance level, ie with all children singing and acting out the story. In class, I prefer to sing unaccompanied (no instrument or CD) in order to enjoy and take advantage of the spontaneity.

Preparation
For this song, each child needs a wad of money and we make our own by folding an A4 sheet of paper in half and then into thirds to give six rectangles which are about the right size. If the children are young we draw along the folds before cutting out the rectangles. Then with crayons, always my favourite, each child produces lots of money. This is, in itself, a great opportunity to have a quick hands-on activity with good results which is entirely described in English.

Procedure
We sit on chairs in a circle. Here are the first few verses, after each one of which I describe our actions for the sentence. (Obviously taking part yourself would make it much easier to appreciate the actions and the ease with which children can learn them – so feel free!) In class, everybody takes part and plays all the roles. A theatre presentation is also possible and as all the children understand the story, each of them can play any role. Either style can be performed, eg to other classes or parents.

Money, money!

Text and music by Andy Reed • Illustrations by Karl Volkmann

1
She sat on her own, her money by her side,
Her money by her side, her money by her side.
She sat on her own, her money by her side,
Her money by her side.
Sit on one side of the chair, placing the money on the other part of the chair. Act lonely and point to the money at the appropriate time.

2
He came along with a very proud stride.
Leaving the money on the chair, stand up and strut around the circle looking important.

3
He saw a rich woman and stared wide-eyed.
Stand before own chair. For ‘saw’, use a flattened hand over the eyes. Point at the woman and the money. For ‘stared wide-eyed’ make the thumb and forefinger of both hands form circles to simulate binoculars and move them backwards and forwards. Look astonished and greedy.

4
He thought of her money and what he could buy.
Point to the middle of the head and then to the money. Make greedy movements with the fingers. Roll the eyes greedily.

5
He went up to her and sat by her side.
Take a step or two up to the chair and perch on the chair, as if the woman is there, whilst gazing at the money. For the repeat of this sentence in the song everybody must stand up and move away in order to take steps up to the chair again.

And so the song goes on until the nasty man gets his come-uppance. (Children like mean stories!)