The fuzzy area of songs in the process of teaching Greek as a foreign/second language: 'Έλα, στην παρέα μας, φαντάρε!'

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Abstract

This paper investigates the utilization of the *fuzzy area* of songs as an alternative way of teaching Greek as a Foreign/Second Language (GSFL), a method that has not received the proper attention it deserves in teaching GSFL. Songs can be identified somewhere on a continuum whose poles are pinpointed by *language* and *music* as it is rather difficult to decide whether they clearly belong to music or language. This includes all nursery rhymes, which contribute to Mother Tongue Acquisition, and almost every song, which might express the whole social, political and linguistic tradition of a nation. Therefore, it is a challenge for the researchers to look for hidden parameters useful in the process of language teaching/learning and cultural familiarization as well. In the present paper we are experimentally investigating the advantages of using the popular song *'Έλα στην παρέα μας, φαντάρε! –Join us, soldier!'* for teenage learners, in a GSFL environment, more specifically in a summer school. The reasons why this particular song was chosen include: (i) its comparatively simple grammar, (ii) its easy, everyday vocabulary, and (iii) the fact it gives some good pronunciation practice in the difficult yet extremely common in Modern Greek, phenomenon of palatalization (*άδεια, πιες, σκοπιές, καρδιάς, γεια σου, πιοτό, παλιά*). Last but not least, we suggest the use of the 'bar', a method based on the fuzzy theory, as a quick way of evaluation of the subjects' performance.

1 Introduction

Language and music share a good number of characteristics as they are both means of communication amongst people. Even more so, the category of *songs* could be quite safely identified to occupy the space between linguistics and musicology. More explicitly songs could activate communication, not only in the purely linguistic sense, but also in a more social, so to say, sense, as music can bring together people who do not share the same linguistic background, offering them pleasure at the same time. Even more so, from a historical point of view, scientists such as N. Cohen (1993) and E. Gioia (2006) claim that in societies without mechanical time keeping, songs of mobilisation that call members of a community together for a collective task, were extremely important, as they intended to increase productivity while reducing feelings of boredom. Furthermore, they help create a feeling of familiarity and connection between the workers. A common feature of African American songs was the *call-and-*

response format, where a leader would sing a verse or verses and the others would respond with a chorus. But doesn't that also happen in class environment where language is taught and the children repeat after the teacher? This is a very good technique in language teaching/learning which has survived in many different methodological schools and accesses.

2 Research background

2.1 Songs in language teaching

In recent years numerous researchers, including Nuessel and Cicogna (1991), Murphey (1992) and Saricoban and Metin (2000), have been investigating the utilization of music and songs in the environment of language learning. Now, it is accepted by many language teachers that songs, if systematically taught, are widely known to provide a useful tool that may intensify certain sides of the curriculum such as:

(i) Improvement of listening and speaking skills, including pronunciation practice.

(ii) Acquisition of grammar/syntax.

(iii) Vocabulary expansion.

(iv) Practice in reading and writing skills.

(v) Cultural sensitizing, as songs *"grow out of the culture and they reflect patterns of daily life, festive occasions, religious observances and political concerns as well as personal and social relationships"* (Purcell, 1992: 194). This last asset is of vital importance in our proposal as we are very interested in finding cultural similarities amongst our foreign learners of Greek as a Second/Foreign language (GSFL) in the specific environment.

Furthermore, as Ebong and Sabbadini (2006) point out:

(i) Words in songs fit the music, helping learners associate the number of syllables / stress in these words, with memorable rhythms.

(ii) The relaxed atmosphere songs create can expose students to difficult pronunciation areas, without their realizing.

(iii) Songs contain endless examples of weak syllables, the natural pronunciation of which is not as easy to acquire to acquire.

Kevin Schoepp (2001), on the other hand, enumerated affective, cognitive and linguistic reasons for using songs in the classroom and how it effectively influences learning ability. He cited the affective *filter hypothesis* of Steven Krashen (1982), which explains that individual who has weak affective filter has a positive attitude towards leaning. It will require teachers to provide a positive atmosphere and using songs in language learning will create such atmosphere. Similarly, he refers to the Gatbonton *et al.* (1988) explanation on the importance of songs in developing automaticity which would appeal to the cognition of students. Since songs are repetitive and consistent, learning language is automatic and easier. Finally, he cited the importance of songs in preparing students to better comprehend the language of informal conversation. Similarly, Graham (1993) emphasizes the contribution of songs in the teaching of grammar.

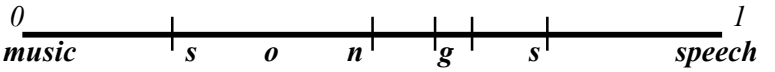
As a final comment one could say that singing activates all body, soul and brain of pupils and this is bound to have a beneficial effect upon the learning process.

2.2 Fuzzy sets and songs

An important question, now, arises as to where the limits between 'speech' and 'song' lie. Ethnomusicologists such as G. List (1963) trying to identify and exactly pinpoint these limits, found it to be extremely difficult and vague, as there was always a *grey zone*, a *fuzzy area* between the two. We could say that songs occupy the space somewhere between the poles of the continuum. The exact point a song lies is especially hard to decide as it depends on a number of reasons including age, gender, nationality, Mother Tongue (MT), background knowledge etc of the subjects. Considering, for example, the case of the old granny teaching her grandchildren a traditional Greek rhyme known as "*the girl and the scarf",* it would be difficult to decide whether she 'taught' music or language or, even more so, mathematical algorithms (Βελούδης, 2005). This is a difficult question to answer, as the specific song actually helps children acquire in a smooth way the particularly difficult pattern of embedded relative clauses.

In our attempt to find some solid theoretical background to support our assumption, we associate songs to *fuzzy sets theory* in Physics. In 1965, Zadeh, a prominent professor of Electrical Engineering, inspired by Linguistic theory and more specifically Semantics and Pragmatics, first introduced the fuzzy sets in Applied Sciences with numerous applications in our everyday life, including washing machines and air conditioning appliances. Briefly, Zadeh talks about the issue of criteria of membership and comes up with relations such as the one shown in the following graphical representation of ***animal / non-animal continuum:***

One could clearly see that there are not clearly defined criteria of membership in the case of *music, speech and songs* and they could be represented on a continuum space like the one above:



2.3. Some applications of fuzzy theory in linguistic research

Fuzzy sets theory could possibly offer more than one application in linguistic research (Joyce, 1976). In this paper we will present another application, which we believe may be useful to both teachers and researchers.

2.3.1 The 'bar'

The escalation of a variable depends both on its nature and on the researcher's judgement. Decisions of this kind are difficult to make in cases such as the compilation of questionnaires to be used in linguistic and other research. Definitely there are certain scales which are preferred to others such as the 5-grade Likert scale:

0= I completely disagree, 1= I rather disagree, 2= I am somewhere between, 3 = I fairly agree, 4= I completely agree.

This type of scale is characterised by certain elements-rules normally identified in every step of the scale. That is to say, they either pinpoint a very positive beginning and a very negative end, or vice versa, as the above example. However, the most difficult part is the partition itself and where exactly the limits of the actual partition lie. The problem of discrimination of those categories is quite serious for the researcher, but is even more so for the subjects of the research, who might need tedious explanations and at the end miss the point of the research. In order to minimize such risks Kambaki-Vougioukli and Vougiouklis (2008) and Καμπάκη-Βουγιουκλή (2009) suggest an alternative method based on the fuzzy theory:

Proposition:

In every question of a questionnaire the scale could be replaced by the 'bar', whose two poles are defined by 0, on the left, and 1 on the right.

The participants, instead of the usual checking of one grade explicitly specified on the scale, they will have to 'cut' the continuum space by a vertical line at any point they think expresses best their answer to the specific question.

Rationale and advantages of the suggested method: Anyone invited to answer will not need any special training or time-consuming explanations as s/he will not have to discriminate the indistinct difference between two grades of a scale. To make our point more descriptive, we compare the use of a Likert scale to that of a bicycle or wheel chair going up or down a flight of stairs, while the suggested 'bar' to a bicycle going up or down an inclined plane.

2.3.2 Use of the bar in class evaluation

We believe that a bar could save us teachers time and effort normally involved in the usual way of evaluation. Therefore, it is suggested here to use the bar instead of actual marks, in class evaluation for a number of reasons including the following: (a) it is quick for the teacher as s/he does not consider the exact mark, but a more relaxing line on the bar; (b) from a psychological point of view, it is easier to be shown to the pupils, as they are not encountered with figures, good or bad marks, but vertical lines on a continuum; (c) for both (a) and (b), it is

appropriate for a summer school where learners are supposed to learn via less conventional methods.

What we need to do:

(i) define the specific sections in which we want to evaluate our pupils' performance, i.e. reading, spelling, listening, vocabulary, (ii) prepare daily tables with the pupils' names and (iii) prepare bars of the same length, whose one pole defines the highest degree of performance on each specific skill and the other complete unsuccessful performance in the specific skill.

Procedure:

The teacher, instead of spending time trying to assign the right mark for each pupil's performance in every single case, s/he can cut the bar accordingly. After the whole process is completed, the researcher or the teacher can divide the bar in as many grades as s/he wishes, equal or not. The advantage is that, in case s/he is not satisfied with the specific division, s/he can try a different one. One might ask whether and to what extent such a procedure is faster, easier and more efficient. My findings show towards this direction, but there is still research to be done and different parameters should be taken into account by different researchers.

2.4 Teaching pronunciation through songs

As for language teaching through songs, researchers such as Ebong & Sabbadini (2006) claim there are no 'standard' songs for teaching pronunciation, because any song can be an example of different pronunciation aspects. By contrast, we think that we must be very careful with the choice of specific songs for specific purposes.

3 Purpose and rationale

Given the lack of exhaustive previous research, the purpose of the present study is to experiment the teaching of every aspect of a language using carefully selected songs.

The onset to start this research was given by the instructor's observation over a period of five years in a summer school that learners seemed to do better in pronunciation when singing. However, they had always chosen the songs at random, without a well-planned and organized methodology. Consequently we thought that it was worth applying the method with carefully selected songs that would contain certain problematic areas regarding pronunciation, such as palatalization, as well as grammar, lexis and cultural facts, with the anticipation of better performance in every aspect—including palatalization—of the participants For the evaluation of each individual's performance the 'bar' was applied. Our objective was to compare the effectiveness of the proposed method to conventional teaching.

4 The research

Method

Subjects

Twenty four, 16 to 18-year-olds participated in the experiment. They were all Bulgarian, attending classes of Greek as a Foreign Language in a summer school,

in Abdera, Xnthi. Subjects were selected amongst a number of participants consisting of 15–18 year olds, on the basis of their age, gender, socioeconomic background and lack of previous contact with Greek language. In order to control another parameter, that of motivation, we asked the participants whether they were interested in music and singing and whether they would like to participate in music contests. The rationale of this decision was to rule out those not interested or not confident enough to participate. Interestingly, there were more boys than girls who wanted to participate, but unfortunately it was not possible to use more, as there were not enough girls to have a good balance.

Design

Two groups of 12 participants were formed, six boys and six girls each. Group A was the experimental group and group B was the control group. Group A was taught exclusivelly through the medium of music, songs and theatrical play, while Group B received usual instruction through a handbook of Greek as a Foreign Language.

There were two teachers in both groups, one Greek with little knowledge of Bulgarian and one Bulgarian with adequate knowledge of Greek. In the whole process the researcher was also involved who was present in the experimental group mainly, but also attended the control group classes from time to time.

Materials and tasks

The popular song *'Έλα στην παρέα μας, φαντάρε! (Join us, soldier!)'* was chosen as the experimental tool of our project. The reasons why this particular song was chosen include its grammatical and structural forms that were of interest to us, such as present simple and some useful imperatives, i.e. *'Έλα, κάτσε, πάρε, πιες'* and also the presence of quite a few types of palatalisation we intended to teach. The actual density of the palatilised items is 1:9.5 or in other words, from the total of 103 words in the song, the 11 manifest the phenomenon. Moreover, the song can be dramatized by using pantomime and some theatrical game. Finally, the musicologists of the team pointed out that the melody might be quite familiar to the participants due to geographical and cultural relation.

The new tool introduced was the use of the 'bar' in order to evaluate our learners' performance as well as the effectiveness of the process compared to the standard one followed by the control group. More specifically, we used a bar whose pole 0 indicated poor performance or effectiveness and pole 1 excellent performance or effectiveness; the length of the bar was standardized to 10cm for reasons of uniformity and parsability:

The teacher and the researcher, independently from each other, cut the bar at any point they feel represented the performance of each participant at each task. Of course there had been a preparation as to what exactly we wanted to evaluate in each case, but there was an eye contact between the two, if something

unexpected cropped up and needed evaluation. The teacher of the control group also used the bar to evaluate his/her group's performance in the same phenomenon

Procedure
Overall, there were six 45-minutes classes every day, from which three or four were devoted to language classes and three to theatrical play, usually supplementary to the language classes, in addition to visits to archaeological areas and museums. Every evening there were cooking classes, folk dances and singing contests, where the participants sang the songs they had been taught. Everybody was given a chance to sing songs of their countries as well. The purpose of this part was the consolidation of the morning knowledge to some extent.

The teachers who undertook the application of the method had received a series of a six hour seminar well in advance and had previous experience; they had taught in this school before and they knew what participants are usually like. The researcher was distinctively present during the whole process ready to intervene if necessary, making sure that there were not things missed at the stage of design, and acting as a member of the group, an actual participant.

In this specific application, the participants were taught the following three songs in 17 hours: (i) *"Ελα στην παρέα μας, φαντάρε!*", by M. Rasoulis-M. Loizos, (ii) *"Θάλασσα πλατιά"* by G. Roussos-M. Hadzidakis and (iii) *"Είμ' ερωτευμένος με τα μάτια σου!*" by K. Kofiniotis-G. Vellas. However, this specific description concerns only song (i), i.e. the first part of a week's sessions consisting of seven teaching hours (out of 17).

4.1 The 7-hour project

Morning session 1 (3 hours)
Introduction
Before going on with our presentation, we should note the following:

(i) The participants had been in the camp for ten days and had already received an introductory 15 hours regular course plus a week of experimenting teaching of two songs. Therefore they had started being familiar with the process.

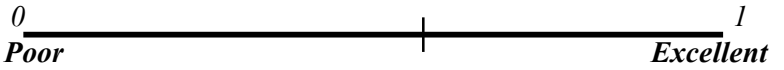
(ii) We did not teach the whole of the first song, being it too long; however we taught the whole of the other two, emphasizing on the phenomenon of palatalisation.

(iii) We consider that at this stage the learners have to imitate exactly what they are listening to by reproducing the teacher or the artist without activating their own linguistic productivity. However, generative exercises are introduced in order to keep balance.

Procedure
1st part: 45 minutes
The two teachers, one Greek and one Bulgarian, played the song on the CD player for a couple of times joining in themselves and encouraging the learners to follow the melody. Only the first two stanzas were played, one couplé and the

refrain, to avoid exposing our learners to extended and difficult vocabulary. At the same time the Greek teacher used pantomime and caricatures on the white board in order to explain to the students what the song was about. Then, the Bulgarian teacher asked comprehension questions in Bulgarian, eliciting answers from them and making sure they had grabbed the gist of the song.

For the evaluation of the answers the teacher used the bar on the white board. For example, she asked "What did the soldier do?" expecting the answer "He jumped into a truck". If the subject answered "He got into a car", he considered it half correct, and cut the bar on the white board somewhere in the middle, closer to the right pole:



Needless to say, that the class became overexcited and kept clapping and cheering in every answer closer to the end 1 of the bar.

2nd part: 20 minutes

After we had made sure they had understood what the song was about, we started practicing the five palatalised items of the first two stanzas. Students took turns repeating while the teacher used bars to evaluate each learner's performance on each item in the same way as above.

3rd part: 70 minutes

The last part of the first three teaching hours was devoted to grammar and vocabulary:

(i) Simple Present of the verbs '*τραβάει, ρίχνει, σαλτάρει, γλιτώνει, παίρνει*'

(ii) Imperatives like *'έλα, κάτσε, πιες, πάρε, ξέχνα'*

(iii) Vocabulary practice

All participants were encouraged to keep notes and write down anything they wanted such as pronunciation in any way or writing system convenient for them. They were also allowed to record the whole procedure.

In the evening, the participants were encouraged to sing with the teachers and the other Greeks and invite all the other learners in the camp to join in. Interestingly, our subjects produced *'comprehensible input'* for the learners of the other groups by teaching them the song, as if they were teachers themselves.

Morning session 2 (3 hours)

The first teaching hour of session 2 was devoted to listening and writing practice. As for writing, the teacher wrote down the first two stanzas on the blackboard and the participants copied it. They had no special difficulty doing so because they were already familiar with writing from their introductory course and the Cyrillic alphabet. Each word was carefully explained and some different representations of [i], [e] and [o] were presented.

The next 45 minutes, after a 15 minute break, were devoted to listening and writing, actually filling in blanks after listening the two first stanzas using Greek,

Latin or Cyrillic alphabet, allocated in three groups of 4 participants each. Our intention was that in this way they would feel more confident, since they would exchange ideas with the members of their group and have group psychology. Their answers were evaluated on the white board using the bar. It is interesting to mention that they themselves asked to participate in the evaluation and the teachers allowed them to do so having in this way an extra interesting parameter.

Morning session 2 (1 hour)

The last 45 minutes of morning session 2 were devoted to the dramatization of the song. Before the break the teachers had talked to the participants about it. They had already been allocated into three groups and they started rehearsing. The roles included a narrator, two people sitting at a table and imitating drinking wine, and a soldier. The idea though was to take turns in every role, so everybody would have played every role by the end of the activity /performance. They also tried using their own names as well as prose instead of singing. Finally, they also tried some transformations in the plural, i.e. *'Ελάτε, πάρτε, καθίστε,...'*, quite successfully too.

In the evening of the same day all three groups performed in the evening activities section, before the other participants, inviting everybody to join and actually teaching them (Krashen's *comprehensible input*). All the teachers of the camp used bars to evaluate each performer. Then, everybody used bars to evaluate each performance and each performer separately, a process they reported to have enjoyed.

5 Evaluation

This paper concerns only the first song of the three chosen to teach palatalisation. However, it was the most important, because it was the introductory one and a lot of parameters had to be taken into account. The final evaluation of the learners' performance on the phenomenon focused was done after all 17 hours of week 2 had been completed and all three songs had been taught. In the appendix, we can have a quick look at a teacher's evaluation of the experimental group's performance on palatalisation as opposed to that of the control group on certain items. One can easily observe that the main problem seems to be the cluster [pj] as in 'σκοπιές' [skopjes] or 'πιες' [pjes]. We think that this quick observation is one of the advantages of the specific tool, namely the bar.

As for the shortcomings, the most important is the choice of the actual song, which although considered ideal at the beginning, it was less than that. This is because of the existence of the pair *άδεια [΄aδia]- άδεια [΄aδja],* which are what we call *formal-casual (λόγιο-μη λόγιο)*. Such pairs are written the same, but they are pronounced differently: the formal without palatalisation and the non-formal palatalized. Furthermore, they mean different things, *άδεια [΄aδia]='leave'* and *άδεια [΄aδja] = 'empty'*. It was proved to be impossible for our learners to make the distinction at this level and even more so confusing and time consuming. The golden rule in teaching *'teach the exception or the variety after the rule is mastered'* is valid in this case too. Therefore, next summer we will postpone this

song for a later stage, perhaps as the final song for the certain phenomenon and compare the results.

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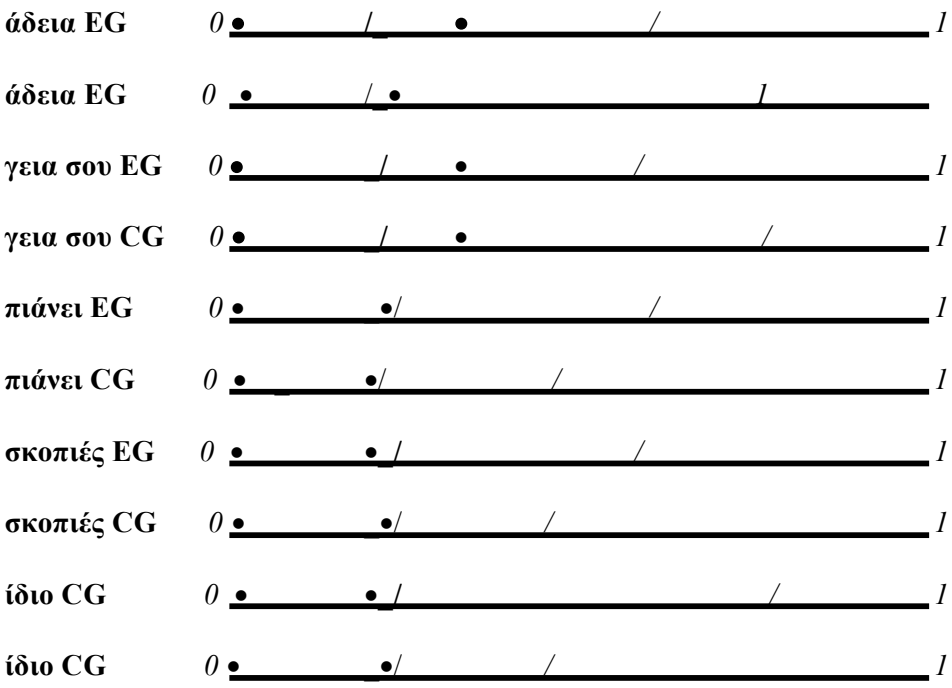
APPENDIX

Here is an example of the collective data for both experimental and control groups as assigned by the teachers after the 17 hours were completed. For reasons of space, we present only one Greek teachers' evaluation.

Key: EG = experimental group, CG = control group. Dots (•) = initial best /worst performance, vertical lines (/) = final best/worst performance. Only individual performances are given (the rest lie somewhere in between)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