

The Use of Ethnic Dance in TEFL

by Jon Burroughs

The use of directed movement in language classes has been shown to be effective in teaching a variety of grammatical structures and vocabulary. Students who act in response to commands in a foreign language have greater retention than students who observe the same actions (Asher 1982: 6).

Folk and ethnic dance in the classroom carries this use of movement one step further. A dance can be used to learn parts of the body, prepositions, and vocabulary that is used for directions and movement, besides stimulating class discussion about countries, cultures, folklore and other topics.

Beyond Total Physical Response

Among the various recent approaches in TEFL methodology that call for some kind of movement in the classroom, James J. Asher's Total Physical Response theory makes the most thorough use of the kinesthetic sensory system. One of Asher's key ideas ". . . in the instructional format for children or adults learning a second language is that understanding should be developed through movements of the student's body" (Asher 1982: 4). For many students, structural instruction that is written on the blackboard for memorization is taught in a vacuum without much connection to reality. The significance of a structure must eventually be demonstrated or simulated to achieve any lasting impression.

The first and most obvious structure gained from movement activities is the imperative form: the teacher tells various students to stand up, go to the window, give another student something, etc. This activity is easy to set up and requires no special equipment. The amount and diversity of commanding that can be done simply depends on the number of verbs the teacher wants to present and on students' initiative

for telling each other to surrender personal objects and move around the room. While this is a welcome break from remaining seated and quiet throughout a language class, it does not carry much human interest outside the immediate situation. Similarly used, folkdance gives the teacher something to work with along the same lines, while creating additional possibilities for language activity.

Linguistic Benefits of Folkdance

In beginning-level English courses, an immediate benefit of teaching a folkdance is the acquisition of numbers. Folk-dancers are counters because the patterns taught are referred to in terms of "step one", "step two", etc. Another benefit is the acquisition of prepositions, which are always included in directional cues, such as "step on left", "move into the circle", "step right foot beside left". The names of various parts of the body also come into play as the teacher repeats instructional cues and demonstrates points of styling: "lift your foot higher"; "clap hands"; "hands on hips".

Providing Background Information

Introducing a dance should begin with a brief summary of where the dance is from, and any information of note about the dance (e.g., it is danced at weddings or religious ceremonies) and whether or not it is still danced on these traditional occasions.

Selection of Dances

Choosing a suitable dance is important. (A few recommendations are noted at the end of this article.) Of the many folkdances which researchers have notated and made available for recreational folkdance groups, those which avoid partner

formation are best for use in a language class, where there is hardly ever an even number of men and women. Aside from a few modern choreographed dances and the disco-type of dancing, most recreational dance done in the West calls for couples, in separated pairs or groups of pairs.

A dance for a language class should be one that the teacher can both demonstrate and teach in front of the group with everyone facing the same direction to facilitate learning steps and directional changes. Older European dances with their mixed lines and circles are well-suited for language practice activities.

Dances with an even number of counts and movements that are not too subtle are best to begin with. There are many folk-dances which have a basic eight-count pattern that are very useful. They can be

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learned in one session and are simple enough so that the teacher can both move and talk through the dance while students imitate the movements and listen to the new vocabulary items and grammatical structures.

Classroom Procedures

The following is a format of a dance activity for the language class using a simple eight-count pattern:

1. Explain to the students what is going to happen, that they are going to learn a folk-dance and that it is going to be easy. The teacher can include here that they will be learning parts of the body as well as movement and directional terms.

2. Have the students stand in scattered formation facing one direction and avoid problems of teaching by "mirror image".

Talk and walk through the dance using numbered counts and abbreviated movement instructions (e.g., count one, step on right; count two, lift left;). Dances suitable for this activity will have only one or two foot movements per count. Beginners are sometimes shy or unsure of themselves, so the patterns must be clear and uncomplicated to avoid confusion.

3. Once the students are fairly secure in their steps, they can be placed in the proper formation (circle, short lines, or one long line, according to the dance) with more adept students leading in the case of line dances.

4. The teacher goes over the dance in formation, talking through it to reinforce vocabulary while introducing prepositions and other vocabulary not used during the first teaching.

5. The dance is done with music, the teacher demonstrating it alone first, if necessary. It is then repeated.

6. The first five steps may be all that time permits for the introduction of a new dance. The next step is to review the dance both verbally and with movement. At the blackboard the teacher writes "count 1," "count 2," etc. and begins a question-answer exercise over the dance movements. The questions will reflect the language level of the class:

• For beginners the question could be:

What is count three?

and the response:

Step left, or Step on left.

For more advanced students, the same dance can be analyzed with progressively more complicated dialog:

What happens on count three?

Step on the left foot.

What do you do on count three?

You step forward on the left foot.

Who can tell me what happens after count three?

I can. You get ready to hop on the left foot.

The class can become less teacher-oriented at this point by having students question each other about counts and movements.

Equipment

The equipment used for dance activities may consist of records and a record player (convenient for quick repetitions, bad if the floor shakes with stamping), a cassette player with cassettes (good if there is enough amplification), musicians with instruments (if appropriate—an unamplified dulcimer would prove too hushed for most groups), or simply the blackboard, as in the case of Serbo-Croatian “silent” kolos in which the leader directs the dance through spoken commands or by stamping different rhythms.

A Few Cautions

There is a lot of new input to take in all at once the first time a dance activity is done with a group of students, many of whom may never have learned a dance by this “recipe” method before or whose background does not include much social dancing. For this reason, careful repetition of dance patterns and vocabulary is necessary to insure a sense of accomplishment with the movement and subsequent language activity. Some students may have trouble imitating dance steps even after several tries. Remember, however, that language skills and not polished dancing are the aim, and the entire

class, regardless of dancing skill, can participate in the question-answer exercises which follow the dance.

Summary

As well as being a stimulating break from routine class procedures, folk and ethnic dances provide material for language growth and open up areas for conversational exchange. “When the target language is followed by a physical action, one understands what was said” (Asher 1982: 59). For vocabulary reinforcement and retention, word identification with corresponding actions and creation of contexts for conversation and comparison, folkdance is a superb classroom tool.

REFERENCE

- Asher, James J. 1982. *Learning another language through actions: the complete teacher's guidebook*. Los Gatos, California: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.

NOTE

Some beginner-level folkdances which have proven to be useful in the classroom are *Hassaposerviko* (Greek) using the dance tune “Lerikos,” *Šetnja* (Serbian), *Sirdes* (Armenian), and *Hashual* (Israeli). Readers who would like further information may write to NAMA Orchestra, c/o David Owens, 2367 Glendon Ave., West Los Angeles, CA 90064 or contact other special record shops which carry folk dance materials.