

Teaching Songs in a Foreign Language

I am reposting a modified version of a reply I gave to another person's post a few minutes ago, customized to address Spanish. I have taught Primary songs in other languages, and my day job is preparing student teachers to teach foreign languages. I speak Spanish and have worked with teachers who teach lots of other languages (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, etc.). Here are a few things I would recommend:

1) CHUNK IT - Since the entire language will be foreign to most of the children, chunk the song into meaningful phrases, and then teach just one phrase at a time. Don't try to teach the whole first verse (or whatever verse you decide to do) in a single Sunday. It is okay for them to just sing the first line or two of the song on one Sunday, review it the next Sunday, and then add one phrase each week. In fact, in Nursery, I always teach songs that way.

2) REPEAT - Repetition is critical. The children need to hear the phrases you are teaching over and over and over again in a short period of time. If you can have a native speaker sing it for the children (or use a recording of one), that is even better because children will pick up the pronunciation they hear. This is particularly true if they don't see the Spanish words written out first. If you show children the written words first, their brains will generally interpret the sounds as English sounds, even if a native speaker is saying them. However, if you have the children listen carefully to the sounds in Spanish and repeat them, and then give them pronunciation tips without showing them the words until after you've practiced saying the sounds correctly for awhile, they'll acquire pronunciation that is much more authentic.

Example: I have them practice keeping the vowels short and clipped instead of long and stretched out like we do in English (i.e., "dado" is NOT pronounced dahhhhhh-doooooooooooooh, but dah-doh). We also practice keeping our tongues behind our two front teeth when we say "Dios" so that it sounds more like "thee" instead of "dee." H's are silent in Spanish (but that isn't really an issue if you are teaching them to listen and then repeat--it only becomes an issue if they are trying to "read" the words off of flip charts, at which point they will try to pronounce them like English sounds). QU sounds like a K in Spanish, so the word "que" is pronounced "k." And Vs sound more like Bs in Spanish, so "vivir" sounds more like "bee beard" (without the D in beard getting pronounced).

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3) PLAY - Think up ways for the children to play with the phrases so they don't get bored with the repetition. For example:

a) MY TURN, YOUR TURN - You sing the first phrase, then have the children echo you.

b) ECHO CHAMBER - You sing it loudly, they sing it back to you softly.

c) AMPLIFIER - You sing it softly, they sing it back to you loudly.

d) PING PONG - Left-hand side of the room sing to the right-hand side of the room, then right-hand side sings it back to the left-hand side of the room.

e) ON THE SPOT - You sing it and then point to a class and the class stands and sings it back to you.

f) WATERFALL - You sing it and then point to a class and that class turns and sings it to the next class, who does the same until the phrase has made it to the back of the room.

g) SING-A-SMILE - Sing it with different emotions (happy, sad, excited, giggling, etc.)

h) MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO - You sing while doing some sort of action and the children have to repeat what you said and did.

i) SING-A-ZOO - Sing it in different animal voices (squeaky mouse voice, cow voice, sheep voice)

j) POPCORN - You point to a child and they stand and sing the first word of the phrase, then each new child you point to sings the next word of the phrase

3) IMAGES - Images are a great way to avoid translating things into English. Put the Spanish words on pictures that clearly show what they mean. For example, "Soy" on a picture of a child pointing to herself, "un hijo" on a picture of a child, and "de Dios" on the Gospel Art Picture Kit picture that shows Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.

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4) ACTIONS - Actions help children internalize the words. I use a LOT of ASL signs when I teach (especially since the word order in ASL generally matches the correct word order in Spanish). So if I were teaching this in Spanish, I might point to myself while singing "I am," use the sign for "child" while singing "a child," and then use the sign for "God" while signing "of God." You can also have older kids help you think up actions for the English words, then pair those actions with the corresponding Spanish words and get them to guess what they are singing.

5) MOVE - The more you can have the kids move, the better. They can do yoga poses, stand on one foot, or do more active things like jumping jacks or twirling around as they sing parts of the song that sound and feel that way. The older kids can turn to a partner and do patty cake type games as they sing. Sharla Dance has a TON of awesome strategies for physically engaging them so they don't get bored as they hear the song over and over (like paper plates, rhythm sticks, windwands, etc.)

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