

## **Drawing Songs of Literacy in a Multilingual Classroom**

by [Bobby Abrol](#)

*Imagine a third-grade class of 60 students who spoke 16 different languages.*

That was the reality of my first teaching job. It was in India, and it was challenging in the extreme, but I'm still grateful for what I learned in that multilingual classroom. There, I felt a desperate need for language experiences my students could share. Teachers of multilingual classes in the United States say that they feel this same need. In all countries, linguistically diverse students need in-school language experiences they can share with their classmates.

But what can work as a starting point for sharing? In my class, singing came to the rescue. (This was a surprise to me because I didn't know anything about music, other than that I enjoy it.) My students often entered class singing folksongs they had learned at home.

I decided to capitalize on this by starting each morning with an oral activity I called *Singer of the Day*. Children have strong visual imagery, and most of the lyrics they sung painted mental pictures, so I added art into my next activity, *Draw Your Friend's Song*. This paved the way to the third activity, using written language in *Magic Sentence for Today*.

My mantra was "Respect the children's cultures; begin from what they know." They came to class with a vast experience of their culture. Expounding on the pedagogical principle of building on their background (Kramsch, 2003), I decided to lock up their old textbooks in a dilapidated cabinet and begin with the new singing/drawing/reading "textbooks" composed with joy by my students.

### **Singer of the Day**

We began each school day with a folksong, an old familiar one that an individual student knew from hearing it at home. I asked Neha, who had a newly-arrived baby brother, to start. I was sure that anything related with her baby brother (a theme from her context) would excite her, so I decided to begin with her. "Neha, can you sing the lullaby that your mother sings at home to your brother?" Neha started, and we were off on a musical fiesta.

She sang it in her native language, and a few who knew that language joined in. This activity lifted the spirits of my class; one after another wanted to be singer of the day. It was as if each of them had been waiting to be called upon to sing in their beloved native language.

Then I presented an offer to them. "You teach me your songs, and I'll teach you how to write them." It's not hard to figure why students responded well to this offer. For the first time, they felt respected for what they already knew. For the first time, the teacher took a back seat and, in their many different languages, the students took the charge of the phonetics, lyrics, and meanings of the words in their songs for their class.

Each day it was an educationally precious moment for me to see the joy on their faces as a student would sing his or her folksong. I would write it on the chalkboard in the school language.

Suddenly, inscriptions on the board started making sense to them—because they could connect them with the words of their songs or their friend’s song. I saw the concept of organic reading and writing proposed by Ashton-Warner (1974) in practice.

It was sheer joy to see them run their fingers over the text copied from the chalkboard and experience being a reader. Students would make repeated trips to the board, asking about one word after another. I acknowledged their wonderful oral skills, and they learned to associate writing (partially copying at this stage) with meaning.

A friend of mine, who teaches English as a second language in Texas, told me that she did something similar:

I put the words of the songs on the board when my students from Mexico sing in Spanish. They know lots of lullabies. My English-speaking students picked up the Spanish words easily, but then they wanted to share their [own native] lullaby.... I had a few students from India, too, and they sang lullabies in Hindi, their native language. All the other students wanted to learn the Hindi words.

I was happy to hear that the same approach that worked so well for me in India also worked well in a multilingual classroom in Texas.

### **Draw Your Friend’s Song**

Most folksongs, lullabies, and ballads are event-specific, context-based songs. The lyrics deliver visual imagery. I realized this in my classroom in India when I noticed a student, Hemant, drawing a vivid scene after hearing the singer of the day. The scene had five women sitting together with a new bride, each one of them dressed traditionally. This imagery corresponded to the song and the explanation given by Mahima, whose song was a famous wedding song.

For me, this was a pedagogical discovery, to see that my students could organically combine songs and drawings in language learning. From then on, I told them to draw every song. Each student would draw using different cultural symbols—jewelry, clothes, food, trinkets from his or her own cultural heritage. My classroom walls were soon adorned by their beautiful representations, showing a variety of cultures and ethnicities.

My students would come running to me with their drawings, wanting to label certain items with the right words. These were golden learning moments; the students wanted to listen and draw, and then to read and write because the words had a personal meaning for them.

My friend in Texas remarked that she was going to try the art extension of the singing, “[The American] song, ‘Here Comes the Bride’ probably has a Mexican version and an Indian one, too....Maybe a rancher’s song, like ‘Give me a home where the buffalo roam, and the deer and the antelope play...’”

### **Magic Sentence for Today**

“You are looking beautiful, Ms. Abrol!” My student Rupa never failed to make this comment to me at the beginning of our school day in India, and then she would listen as I said it back to her. One day, I decided to use her sentence as a language resource, as I had used the lyrics of some songs. I wrote it on the chalkboard and then invited my class to help me write it in each of their languages.

Amid lots of giggles and chuckles, we produced the following list—the same sentence in four major languages.

<i>You are looking beautiful</i>	English
<i>Tum sunder lag rahi ho</i>	Hindi
<i>Tam chokhi laag rei ho</i>	Khadi boli
<i>Aapni sundra chehra</i>	Bengali

The idea was to show the similarities and differences in a variety of language structures. It was easy to see the similarities of Hindi and Khadi boli (as I now see with English and Spanish, in Texas), but it was harder to find relationships between English and Bengali.

To add more fun to the activity, I had students replace “beautiful” with a different (less positive) word, and you can imagine the rest of the fun.

### **It Is Just a Beginning**

The above three activities worked well in my multilingual classroom in India, but they appear to be relevant for multilingual and ESL classes in the United States, too. With these activities, language diversity is a plus, not a problem.

### **References**

Ashton-Warner, S. (1967). *Teacher*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

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