

Strategies: Learning and Teaching in Unfamiliar Languages

- Middle Eastern songs, historically, evolved from poetry. The lyrics are deeply rooted in cultural context, and the contour of the phrases are more nuanced than English.¹
- Teaching by ear, rather than from notation, is the way most Middle Eastern songs have been learned and shared, from the cradle to the conservatory.²
- The most challenging part of teaching songs in these languages is for teachers to learn for themselves. Memorization is strongly encouraged; facilitated by sufficient preparation time, listening without analysis, writing, recording one's own voice; utilizing whichever strategies serve the teacher best.
- Having key words on the board to keep one's bearing while introducing a song by ear is fine; but being highly dependent on a score diminishes the magic of an engaging, welcoming introduction, and— the musical nuances that accompany the lyrics.

The first examples in each language category below are songs for primary grades; progressing to songs for upper grades and/or choral ensembles.

A. First introductions to lyrics:

Introducing lyrics (both words and phrases) in unfamiliar languages is helped along by having students engage the senses as the teacher sings. Swaying. Passing a ball. Tracing the melody on a jump rope, watching/following color representations on a tonal ladder, even tapping the contour of a melody on one's arm. If students are given the opportunity to embody sounds and phrases, they are likely to internalize the sounds of words and nuances of phrases without any intentional focus.

Video clips with physical motions

The teacher sings while performing a movement or “body ostinato”. Students easily join in with the motions. And as they imitate the motions, they usually begin to imitate the shape of the lyrics, even with minimal comprehension

Arabic

Hajj Hajjehja [Video 3](#) Teacher introduces new lyrics rocking while singing.

Obba Obba Obba [Video 1, 3 Hands raised like ascending pigeons](#)

Kahkom [Video 3. Passing on the beat](#)

Hebrew

David Melech Yisrael [Videos Hand jive](#)

Simulation of actual motions related to the lyrics and/or full dramatization

Arabic

Hajj Hajjehja Beit Allah [Video 3 Packing the camel](#)

Obba Obba Obba [Video 1, 3 Hands raised like ascending pigeons](#)

Dawwa-khee-nee Ya Lamoonah [Video 1 Lemon spinning](#)

Persian

Yeh Dooneh Anar [Video 3 Extracting pomegranate seeds one by one](#)

Turkish

¹ Ibrahim, W., personal communication

² Ibrahim, W., personal communication

Yah, Yah, Yahmur [Video 5](#) *Each line of the lyrics has motions simulating the lyrics*
 Fuhsh, fuhsh, Kahyukchuh: [Videos 3,4, 5](#) *Rowing motions*

Tracing the melody

While listening, a student manually follows the length of a melody on a jump rope or cotton cord. After a few repetitions, questions are posed such as “Where did the singing stop?” or “Was the melody as long as the chord? Or, a direction might be given such as “Stop when you hear the sound ‘free’.” There’s no correct way to do this activity. The goal is always the same; the simultaneous subconscious internalization of lyrics and musical nuances.

Arabic

Tishtik [Video 4](#) *Melody tracing*

Persian:

Lalaie: [Video 2](#) *Melody tracing*

Kurdish

Ey Choleke [Video 2](#) *Melody tracing*

Meshka: [Video 2, 3](#) *Melody tracing*

Following melodic contour

A color tonal ladder becomes the structure for tracking a phrase of lyrics. Questions follow about the specific colors. For example: What color did the melody start on? The activity is to repeatedly listen to the lyrics while concentrating on something else.

Turkish

Yah Yah Yahmur [Video 3, 4](#)

Kurdish

Meshka [Video 1](#) *Both lyrics and musical reinforcement*

Passing the beat

The teacher sings as the students pass a ball or other object. The song is repeated several times with different listening focus. The teacher might ask..“Who was holding the ball when the melody stopped”, or “Clap on the rests.”

Arabic

Kahkom [Video 2](#) *Keeping the beat. Clap on the rests*

Organizing meter or form

The teacher sings alone. Students are asked to lay out an array of necessary beats using manipulatives such as small wooden blocks.

Kurdish

Heng [Video 1, Photo 4](#)

B. Securing Lyrics

With unrushed time, teachers can weave fluency in singing and pronunciation with activities or comments that reinforce the meaning of the song/lyrics.

Arabic

Haadi Baadi [Video 1](#) *Without the game, focus on beat icons- refreshes pronunciation of the lyrics.*

Kahkom [Video 3](#) *More complex focus on beat icons refreshes pronunciation of the lyrics*

Kahkom [Photo 1](#) *Teacher reviews the narrative without singing.*

Kahkom [Video 1](#) *Students “walk through” the action of the singing game without singing.*

Persian

Yeh dooneh Anar: Securing numbers by doing a different activity while singing the song [Video 4](#)

Turkish

Yah yah yahmur [Video 5](#)

C. Strategies with phonetically spelled lyrics

Short sentence fragments:

Persian

Yeh dooneh anar [Section B, Video 1](#) Numbers, symbols, and eventually short phonetic spellings of words and phrases are on the board. As the students begin to join in the singing, phonetic spellings are erased.

Sequencing lyric strips: a strategy when there is substantial text

- When students have listened to a song several times and are beginning to sing along, lyric strips are passed out to partners or small groups.
- The activity begins with the lyric strips facing down. As with activities using rhythm sequence cards, students sing, then turn the cards face up and put the lyric strips in order.
- As the singing becomes secure, sequence cards may be turned over, or covered with a different color blank strip.
- This activity, given sufficient time, is an efficient path to memorization.

Important: If students have listened to the song several times before reading phonetic spellings, they will pronounce the lyrics as they’ve heard them rather than default to their habitual system of decoding.

Persian

Yeh dooneh anar [A section Video: 1](#)

Kurdish

Heng [Video 4, 5](#)

Hebrew

*David Melech Yisrael [Photo 2, 3](#) Sequencing Hebrew lyrics in native characters

D. *Decoding challenge: Very occasionally, small clues will challenge students to sequence lyrics even when the language’s characters have never been introduced.

Hebrew

David Melech Yisrael Photo

E. Phonetic spellings should be in the **lingua franca** of the class or ensemble. If the primary language of instruction in the school is Spanish, create phonetic spellings as the sounds would be

spelled in Spanish. If the school is an international school, use the phonetic system of the primary language of instruction.

Arabic

A ya Zane [Photo 2 \(Spanish\)](#) **Photo 1** [Link \(Polish\)](#)