

# Rhythm's gonna teach you

**L**IKE CATCHY TUNES that get stuck in the head, Earworms, a music-based learning method of foreign languages, promises the same. **Carolina D'Souza** interviews the developers of the concept after they launched Arabic

My favourite history lesson is a rock song – the '89 US Billboard hit *We Didn't Start the Fire* by Billy Joel.

It isn't because all 121 items in the lyrics chronicle historical events from 1949 to 1989. It isn't because it's sung in a rapid, half-spoken and -sung vocal style. Or because the melody is catchy.

It is my favourite because these elements made it easy to memorise unrelated incidents from entertainment to political affairs.

Rhythm and words, I discovered, are a powerful memory aid, and music an ideal catalyst. So when I picked up a copy of Earworms, an audio CD of Rapid Arabic with music, I was optimistic.

Again, I wasn't so because it had more than 200 essential words and phrases. Or because it came with a printed phonetic phrase book. Or because it was compatible with my iPod.

I was optimistic because it was easy to listen to. I played it while driving, exercising and relaxing at home. It was effortless, enjoyable and most importantly, effective.

**"Learning to music is relaxing, enjoyable and highly effective," says Marlon Lodge.**



The idea of music-based learning isn't new. Most of us use the mnemonic – rhymes or acronyms used to aid memory – power of music. (Think lyrics of *Yellow Submarine* by the Beatles or *Satisfaction* by The Rolling Stones.)

"People recall these [lyrics] even if English isn't their native language," says Marlon Lodge, UK-based founder, author and creative director of Earworms, and teacher of foreign languages who has taught school students and professionals at companies including HSBC, BBDO, PWC and Marsh & McClelland.

Marlon tried several memory techniques during his 24 years of teaching and realised the main problem with language learning is the task of memorising hundreds of words and phrases. He was also frustrated with the standard of ineffective book-based pedagogy and concluded that learning through music was the simplest and most enjoyable method.

His ideas coalesced into the Earworms Audio Series, patented MBT (Musical Brain Trainer), a music-based learning method of foreign languages. Marlon and his

younger brother Andrew launched the series in 2006 with five European languages for the UK market – Spanish, French, Italian, German and Greek.

The series is currently available in 12 languages including Arabic, released at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair in March. (Each language has two volumes.)

Marlon and Andrew's is a collegial partnership in which the older brother manages the creative side and the younger, marketing and contracting.

Andrew, a former oil field engineer whose metier is business, says, "He [Marlon] has no interest in the financial side. He is far too scholarly. He has been working on this project to bring about a shift from the traditional chalk-and-talk

teaching method." The term Earworms is used to refer to catchy tunes you can't get out of your head. The Lodges say: "We have put this phenomenon to a positive educational use."

They have witnessed vertiginous success in sales and customer reviews. The series – across all languages – continue to top downloads in the US, UK and Australia. In 2007 the Rapid Spanish Series made it to the top five iTunes bestsellers alongside *The Secret*, *Stephen Colbert* and *This American Life*. The series also boast an average Amazon customer rating of four stars or higher.

The Lodges recall the initial reaction when customers said they were surprised the concept wasn't reified yet. "We are besides ourselves," says Andrew. "We sold more than

50,000 series in the Asia-Pacific region last October."

## The learning process

The brouhaha hasn't died down. While reviews and sales on Amazon and iTunes prove the effectiveness of the learning method, it is interesting to learn the scientific rigour behind the concept.

Marlon gives an example. He once taught a group of young people phrases for international business correspondence. Each student was given a demo CD – based on the Earworms method – with 300 difficult terms. He told them to listen to the third track for the exam, and tested them. "They were tapping their feet to the beat of music in their heads while recalling the words from the

CD. Most of them scored 90 per cent and above," says Marlon who has endeavoured to imbue students with a fun learning spirit.

According to him, learning should be easy – a fact corroborated by various neuropsychological studies. "Truth is, the ideal state for learning is relaxed and calm," he says.

The Earworms concept draws from this body of research and the scientifically proven capacity of the mind to memorise words, phrases and ideas far better in melodic patterns.

"Learning to music is not only relaxing and enjoyable, but also highly effective. And requires minimum concentration," says Marlon.

This tenable method is based on two mechanisms – rhythmic repetition and relaxation through music. He



## 'I RECOGNISE SEVERAL WORDS'

Gwen Dickson, a grade 1 teacher at Our Own English High School, Dubai, says, she was pleasantly surprised when she played Earworms Rapid Arabic Audio CD.

Her husband, Melroy, purchased it at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair in March "to familiarise themselves with the language". She played it for the first time while driving along her usual route from school.



"I really enjoyed listening to the tracks. They were entertaining and educational. It is really effective; I recognise several words. The language is presented in

a logical, clear manner," she says.

At school her grade 1 students have started learning Arabic. "I may recommend the CD to their parents to help them learn better. However, as they have just started, I will wait another three months to do so."

At home, she plays the CD for about 10 minutes in the morning. "This is when I am doing morning chores as the day starts. I manage to finish two or three tracks every day."

says repetition is an effective way to learn a new language with correct pronunciation. Music puts the learner into the optimum state of consciousness for learning or the alpha state, which is relaxed yet receptive. Music also engages and stimulates the right and left hemispheres of the brain, facilitating whole brain learning processes.

He says, "This combination [of repetition and music] produces the desired effect of committing words, phrases and ideas to memory."

When you listen to the series, active concentration isn't required, says Andrew. "Relax and listen. You must allow your brain to do the learning."

Earworms also introduces the learner to the lexical approach or a method that parses the language in a simplistic manner. Michael Lewis expounded the approach in his book *The Lexical Approach*. Simply stated it focuses on language in terms of whole meaningful chunks instead of concentrating on grammar.

"You learn to break language into chunks and reconstruct it. This way you not only learn complete, immediately useful phrases, you also intuitively learn something about the structure [grammar]. The learner can mix and match these chunks to gradually build whole areas of the language," says Marlon.

The Lodges advise memory techniques like memory hooks or associating sounds of the words with other familiar words and visual images to complement and support learning. "For example, I recall 'excuse me' in Greek with 'messy oil heater' because it sounds something like me-see-

oreeter," says Andrew.

### Music in learning

In the '70s, the Bulgarian physician Georgi Lozanov carried out extensive research into the power of music in the learning process. He said music enhanced learning of linguistic elements, and put listeners in an alpha state, thus confirming putative references to the idea.

"His tests were conclusive," says Marlon, citing a study in the March 2005 issue of *Nature*.

"According to researchers at the Psychological and Brain Sciences Department, Dartmouth College, US, the auditory cortex in the brain is where earworms or catchy tunes reside. The study, led by David Kraemer, found that this area is stimulated when we imagine melodies and associated words. And the auditory cortex is active when you listen to a song or imagine hearing one.

"By tapping into the auditory cortex, the area responsible for processing and storing sound waves, and to some extent evoking an emotional response through music and dialogue, Earworms unleashes learning potential," he says.

Melody, however, has to meet set criteria to be an effective recall cue. It has to be easily learnt and sufficiently tied to the melody in line and syllable length of the phrases. As such it has to be simple enough not to distract from the text it is supporting.

The melodies for Earworms are composed by Marlon and Andrew, former musicians; Marlon plays guitar and saxophone and Andrew guitar, drums and keyboard.

**Andrew Lodge...** "Relax and listen. You must allow your brain to do the learning."

"We mix live instrumentals and electronic samples to produce tracks that are light and open with a defined beat/rhythm. Ours is an organic process of recording. We add or take away some of the music to fit around the voices," says Andrew, explaining they ensure the music has enough room for the spoken voice and the instruments don't contain frequencies that clash with the voice.

"Think of it this way," says Marlon. "Earworms isn't simply words with background music. It is a lexical deconstruction of language into easily understandable chunks with music as the carrier."

When you listen to any Series, you may feel you are only listening to



CHRISTOPHER LIST/ANM

### ABOUT EARWORMS SERIES

The Earworms syllabus follows the Common European Framework (CEF) of Reference on Language Learning, a recognised benchmark. The guidelines categorise six different levels of language proficiency and correspond to the UK's National Language Standards level one.

The Earworms Series is available in two Volumes; one deals with essential phrases and the second with detailed phrases linked to general

conversational items. The 12 languages include Chinese, Cantonese, Dutch, German, Japanese, Russian and Arabic.

The accompanying booklet contains the text on the CD, phonetics for each word or phrase. The developers, Marlon and Andrew Lodge, recommend that one listen to the Series a couple of times in quick succession on the first day to "tune your ear in" to the sounds of the language. Then regularly over the period of a week. "Thereafter, it is a question of refreshing your

memory. Also, familiarise yourself with the written words in the booklet – at least the first time you listen," says Marlon. Last is the review phase. "Listen once a week during the following few weeks. Thereafter monthly. The review phase is crucial as it consolidates your knowledge and transfers it into your long-term memory," he says.

Earworms is distributed by Arif Abdullah Books Trading, Dubai.



music, "but subconsciously you are taking in masses of verbs, nouns and connecting words," he says.

For the brothers the chance to sing and play different instruments was part of the attraction to be involved in the music production.

"When embedded in jazz and hip hop tracks, even the most difficult and boring phrases are entertaining," says Andrew.

Though the series have the same 11 tracks for all languages, he says they do not vitiate the learning method and "customers who have bought several [languages] have no problems with learning".

Observably, another issue is the subjectivity of music taste that can alienate listeners in a preset learning format. The Lodges say Earworms has a mix of genres – "nothing too extreme". There is a balance, says Andrew. "We get customers who hate techno or classical music. One customer couldn't listen to music with drums and another could only listen to Baroque! We plan to compose tracks with classical music."

### Starting out

It's incredulous to learn it was a challenge for the Lodges to get people to listen and experience Earworms. But they persisted, and left a copy for review at their local Waterstone's bookshop, one of UK's leading bookseller. The store manager called them a few weeks later and said, "This is fantastic."

And it "spiralled from there" says Andrew. "Once they listened, it was easy to market it."



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## TRENDS

### THE MUSIC LANGUAGE CONNECTION

"The right music can help language learners acquire not only vocabulary and pronunciation, but also phrases, grammar and culture" says Jon Stansell (right), M.Ed, lecturer in English at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, who has been researching the music-language connection since he began learning foreign languages in 1993.

Stansell taught himself Czech by developing a five-part musical roundchant called the Ktomu Song. According to him, "Direct, active use of music, such as singing, beating a rhythm, and even rhythmic movement should be considered an essential part of language learning. These intrinsically motivating language learning stimuli are particularly effective if presented in a low-risk, enjoyable environment," he says.

As part of his masters degree programme in Education, he wrote a paper



titled "The Use of Music in Learning Languages", which is under review at the *Journal Music and Medicine*.

He says music is an ideal catalyst in the memorisation of words, especially in foreign language learning. "Music is effective in word memorisation because it combines the logical content of a message with the emotional context of a melody. Language already has the music of intonation inside it so we are simply building on nature."

Stansell comments on Bulgarian physician Georgi Lozanov's work in the power of music in learning, and clarifies that the method utilising instrumental music wasn't connected to the foreign language input in a direct way. "The alpha state referred to was

induced through relaxation techniques and instrumental music. Learners would lie on the floor in various poses and the teacher would read expressively from a foreign language text as classical music played in the background," he says.

Stansell also mentions that research suggests text (language) needs to be sufficiently tied to the melody be a good recall cue. "Consider the three main parts of a song: rhythm, sequence of pitches [together known as melody] and text. Humans enjoy listening to songs in which these elements blend harmoniously into a whole emotional experience," he says. "When language learning happens, it feels right, and that's the power of music."

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive both subjectively and objectively. "With Earworms, students scored more than 90 per cent in difficult vocabulary tests compared to less than 50 per cent with conventional book learning. A pilot project carried out in 2007 at Dr Challoner's School in the UK also received a positive feedback. This year we hope to focus on the school's language material," says Marlon.

Subjectively, he says, learning with Earworms has a feel-good factor. "This shouldn't be under estimated in terms of motivating learners in a subject which is often regarded as difficult and boring."

The series has the same work process. Marlon and his team research the language with special attention to cultural sensitivities and common perceptions. For Arabic and Russian they researched over a period of two years.

Research is followed by translating and discussing language issues with native speaking linguists and setting it to music. Then comes the recording process that can take up to four months. (They record in their private studios in Germany and Cyprus.)

The recordings are sent to a proofreader and other teachers for input and suggestions as well as to the respective media counsel for approval. Objectionable items are expurgated.

"When we recorded Arabic, we avoided references that may have offended local traditions and checked for the most popular dialect. In certain markets we use locally preferred terminology too. For instance "Band-Aid" in the US and "plaster" in other regions," says Andrew.

The Lodges plan to add Swedish, Korean and Welsh to the Series. "And maybe a few new rap, hip-hop tunes as well," says Andrew.

Carolina D'Souza is Lifestyle Features



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