

Learning Your First Song Pt I.

Objective

Teachers will learn various methods and procedures for teaching a song to a class of guitar students. Including:

1. Songs to start with.
2. “Non confusing” nomenclature.
3. Right and left hand technique.
4. Non threatening (for you and students!) assessments .
5. Reading chord charts.

Materials

Not everybody has all these materials, but here are some things (besides guitars and picks) that will make your life easier.

- Computer
- LCD projector or overhead projector
- Presentation program (Power Point, Keynote, Google Docs, etc)
- Video camera and AV out cord.

Learning the Landmarks

A lot of these have been covered before, like “What to do on the first day”, and various right and left hand techniques. This is a step by step process of how to teach a song, and incorporate chart reading, and specific guitar techniques.

Every song you teach can be approached different ways, and you can pull specific techniques out of each one like, picking patterns, chord shapes, stylistic feel, left or right hand muting, and more. Learning these techniques in context of the song is much more fun than drills and isolation studies especially in beginner students.

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The first thing you should do is go over the parts of the guitar paying special attention to the strings, frets, the nut and the bridge. Those are the major landmarks on the guitar, and you'll use them to indicate position.

It's better to say, "move your hand towards the nut or bridge", instead of up or down the neck. New students don't know which is up or down and you'll be facing them, so your up or down is backwards to them.

A lot of 9 and 10 year olds don't know their right from their left (or don't know it intuitively), so you should can say pick hand and neck hand.

If you're working with elementary school students they can get confused when you start saying fret two string five, so if you start naming the left hand by numbers, they'll really be confused when you say "fret two, string two, finger two". It's less confusing if you say, index, middle, ring, pinky.

It can also be confusing to younger or beginner students if you say "high string and low string". If you're not a musician high and low means position, not pitch. Instead you can say the string closest to your nose (or ceiling) or the string closer to the floor. Remember your goal is to start playing music, not to spend all your time teaching vocabulary. Just make sure that the vocabulary you use isn't technically incorrect. For example: the string closest to your nose is the lowest sounding string, and is called that in "proper" guitar-speak. However once your students have learned to think of low as pitch and not position, it won't be too confusing to call it the low string. In the mean time say the string closest to your nose or closest to the floor, which doesn't even mention high or low.

Learning the Chords

In this example we'll use the song "Horse With No Name" by America. It's not too fast, it uses 4 chords, all the chords use 2 fingers (index and middle), and they use the 2nd fret and all 6 strings.

Start by teaching the Em chord, use fingers 1 and 2, not 2 and 3 as are typically used. If you're got a large class and a computer or video camera and LCD projector, use the webcam or camera to project your fingers up on the board. A

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camera is especially useful because you can pick it up and turn it to look at your fingers from the players point of view. You can also turn it to look straight down the neck to see the fingers on their tips, you can also show the thumb position too.

After you've showed them the chord, and most seem to be getting it, have them look at their neighbors hands, and help their neighbor if they need it. You can group them into partners or just have the students look to the immediate right or left. If they're in partners have one student be the student and the other be the teacher, the teacher helps the student get their chords. (Remind the "teachers" it's their responsibility, if the students don't get it.) Then have the students switch roles with the teachers. You'll find the second group plays better than the first, because they'll fix their own mistakes after having fixed others. Make this a regular habit, and you'll find all of your students thinking more critically about their playing.

Playing the Chords in Context

Don't wait until the chords are perfect to play a song, when the whole class plays, and it sounds like an Em, then start working on the right hand technique. Have the students echo you 4 beats of Em, you play then they play, using all down strokes. Once they can do that have them play first then you play 4 beats of D6. So they play | Em / / / | you play | D6 / / / |. Then have them "air guitar" with the actual recording. That is, they move their pick but don't actually strum the strings. Have the say 1,2,3,4 while they're (pretend) playing and rest, rest, rest, rest, when they're not. What you want is for them to hear how the song goes, without having to worry about picking and keeping their fingers in the right spot. After they "air guitar" have them play for real, along with the song (or with the teacher alternating the D6 chords)

Summary

By this point you might have spent a month just learning two chords. If your class is every day a week and your students get to practice at home, you may have spent just a few days. Don't be afraid to go slow at first. You should "front load"

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your effort. The more time you spend getting the chords and right hand comfortable, the quicker they'll learn the next song.

You don't want to bore students of course. So always keep adding levels of complexity. If they can change chords with a quarter note pattern in the right hand, then add a more complex right hand pattern. (See part 2) Play along with the recording. Play along with a student drummer. Try to sing and play at the same time. Have half the class accompany, have the other half sing. Take the chords and mix them up, play them for longer duration or a different order. Every song you do has a wealth of material you can use to teach musical concepts.