

# Language through tunes, lyrics, and technology

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Using pop music has become a commonly accepted practice for enhancing learning in the English language classroom. Currently, many teachers and English language textbooks provide music listening activities as a feature or as a supplement to learning in a multi-skills based course. This paper will first provide background, reasons, and suggestions for using music for language learning in the classroom. Furthermore, ideas, activities, and projects will be introduced to expand the role of music in the classroom.

洋楽を使った英語の教育は、これまでも多くの現場で行われてきている。現在多くの英語教育者や教科書は様々なクラスの補助教材として、洋楽を取り扱う。この論文は、まず洋楽を使った言語習得に関する今の研究を紹介し、洋楽を使うことの利点、活用方法について論ずる。次に、洋楽の可能性を最大限に引き出す為のアイデア、アクティビティ、そしてプロジェクトを紹介する。

**N**UMEROUS STUDIES have reported the advantages to using music in the English language classroom. Some of the main advantages outlined in the research include the reduction of student anxiety, the increase of motivation, familiarizing students with authentic English sounds, relating to students' lives in a personal way, and ultimately providing a memorable and enjoyable learning experience for students.

According to Krashen's "affective filter hypothesis" (Krashen 1982), a learner's negative feelings and attitudes toward the learning environment can create a filter that can reduce the acquisition of linguistic input. In order for students to have an optimal learning environment, they need to feel open to the language learning experience. Several researchers noted the importance of music in creating positive associations with language learning. Moi (1994) pointed out that part of the reason rock music lyrics are so highly motivating is because of the relevance and personal impact on students' lives. Additionally, Maley (1987) notes the benefits of music in EFL instruction because of its inherent memorable and universal qualities. Many articles noted the positive response among students and the ability for music to transcend the text and open students to the content and message communicated through rhythm, beats, and sounds. Medina (2002) asserts that music in the EFL classroom can have a relaxing effect on students and likewise decrease their inhibitions toward learning a second language. When stu-



dents feel at ease, they are more comfortable, confident, attentive, and receptive to learning new language skills. Additionally, Haskell (1999) found that using music in the English language classroom had a motivating effect that led to increased participation and productive effort from students. Moi (1994) also observed that using lyrics as a text is highly motivating because of its inherent ability to bridge personal and meaningful ideas with the more rigorous aspects of language study.

A number of researchers (Lems, 2001; Milano, 1994; Christopher, 1998; Castellanos-Bell, 2002; Diamond & Mincz, 1994) found that music in the English language classroom had a direct impact on students' ability to comprehend and produce authentic English sounds. Not only can music assist in the acquisition of vocabulary, idioms, and colloquial expressions, it can also introduce students to the natural sounds and rhythms of spoken English. Of particular importance to EFL learners is the focus on the stretching and contracting of English speech into segmental and suprasegmental sounds. Students who are not studying in the context of the target language environment can benefit from the extra focus on natural pronunciation in order to enhance their conversation ability.

### **Song and focus**

Choosing appropriate songs should be based on class level, background, and the interests of the students and teachers. Songs can be chosen by the instructor or by the students but generally should take into account distinct features of the music. The tempo, the clarity of the singer's voice, the repetition of lyrics and appeal to the audience are some of the factors to consider. Also, songs should be considered based upon the course or class objectives, whether they be linguistic functions of language or content-based and thematic. There are different focuses or approaches to teaching songs. Instructors can choose one or a combination, depending on the class and students.

Three fundamental aspects that instructors can focus on include sound, grammar, and theme.

### **Sound**

The first and the most evident aspect that language teachers using music can focus on is sounds. Music exposes students to authentic English sounds that they are likely to encounter in real life. English textbooks are designed and created especially for non-native English speakers whereas songs are composed and written regardless of the listener's native language. In other words, for those who are successful in language classrooms but struggle once they step out of their class and interact with native speakers, music can be the most natural and beneficial tool to learn English from. The approach to sounds can be divided or combined in two ways: suprasegmental and segmental. For suprasegmental activities, the emphasis is on things like pitch, stress, tone, and pauses. By learning about these elements and how they work, students have a better understanding of the song, its message, and the emotional impact of the song. If instructors want to teach specific sounds or how they are commonly connected to produce a different sound, they can concentrate on segmental aspects of the song.

### **Grammar**

The second focal aspect is grammar. Students can learn a specific grammar aspect or language feature through a song. Many songs provide examples of common sentence structures. For example, Eric Clapton's song "Change the World" uses the conditional structure "If I could \_\_\_\_\_ I would \_\_\_\_\_" several times throughout the song. After studying how Clapton uses this structure to express unreal conditions, students can create their own conditional statements through controlled or free writing exercises. By understanding

the mechanics of how the language works, students can predict and/or guess missing lyrics in a cloze or gap-fill exercise. For example, students can be given a lyrics sheet with missing words and use their knowledge of language to identify the part of speech. This will limit their choices during a gap-fill listening activity. Instructors can also create their own cloze listening exercise lyric sheet that can focus on removing a specific part of speech that students are studying. Ultimately, these will help when students are listening and filling in blanks or trying to comprehend the lyrics to understand the message of a song. Even though songs sometimes have “inaccurate” grammar usage, they still introduce natural English that students may encounter outside the classroom.

### Theme

The last approach is focusing on the themes of a song. Contrary to the other two focuses introduced above, the emphasis is on the content of the song rather than the language itself. With this approach, students discover the message of a song and background information about the artist and the music. Additionally, students can analyze the lyrics, the title of the song, and have an opportunity to discuss it or respond to it in writing. Furthermore, students can listen and compare two songs that deal with the same theme but with alternative perspectives to examine the differences. They can also discover, explore, analyze, and share songs that are about specific topics such as family, relationships, and politics.

### Steps

Just as with any other teaching materials, there are steps that instructors can take to teach music. Similar to many listening activities, the process can essentially be divided into three steps: pre-listening, listening, and post-listening.

### Pre-listening

This stage enables students to get some ideas about the song before they listen. This is helpful because it can give some clues about the material they are about to study and motivate students by activating their schemata. There are several ways to implement activities using a title or key words from the song, such as brainstorming, prediction, and discussion. Instructors can also focus on sounds by introducing specific features of sound change, drawing attention to articles, conjunctions, and other words that undergo reduction in rapid speech, known as linking words, that frequently appear in songs. The instructor can simply explain them and/or let students do some controlled listening practice such as minimal pairs, dictation, or gap-filled listening exercises.

### Listening

There are mainly two approaches that instructors can combine together or do separately while students listen to the song and interact with the material. One is a top-down approach where the focus is on the content of a song rather than specific details of the song. For example, while listening to the song students can check their predictions of the topic, theme or key words of the song that they brainstormed during the pre-listening task. They can also identify the genre or style of the song or try to determine the theme or topic of the song. Finally, students can express their emotional reactions to the song in pairs, groups, or as a class. This gives students an opportunity to share their feelings and thoughtful reactions to the music. Depending on the level, this can be prompted by asking students to draw and explain pictures, answer teacher-led discussion questions, or simply engage in free conversation related to the song.

The other approach is bottom-up listening where students focus more on listening for specific words, sound changes, or key

information. Sample activities include discriminating words or sound changes that they have been introduced to and practiced during pre-listening activities. They can also listen specifically for content or key words of the song and write them down or simply choose them from a list that is provided by the instructor to complete missing lyrics. Depending on the difficulty of the song and the class level, students can do a complete or partial dictation or dictogloss, focusing on recreating the lyrics individually, in pairs, or in groups. If the focus of the class is more on speaking, students can sing or shadow as they listen to the song.

### **Post-listening**

Once students have listened to the song several times, post-listening activities can be introduced. Students can check their answers to the listening exercises in pairs or groups by reading the lyrics to each other or simply by matching. After they have complete lyrics, the class can analyze the song. One option is to have students simply translate the song into their native language and compare expressions. If necessary, idioms and slang can be explained by the instructor. Students can also examine symbols and metaphors that often appear in songs. To increase their interest or understanding, it is also helpful to provide them with background information about the artist or the song.

In addition to comprehending the lyrics, it is important for students to personalize the material. Instructors can help do this by making discussion questions about the song that are appropriate to the students' level. Students can also write a reaction or opinion journal about the song. This way they can feel safer and more comfortable sharing their personal feelings about the song and their own experiences related to the theme or topic of the song.

### **Additional activities and projects**

Response to music varies because of personal and cultural tastes. Therefore, it is important to allow students some freedom and choice within a structured class or course. Here are some ideas for additional assignments and projects that put students in control of the content and can be done inside or outside the classroom.

### **Music reports**

After students become familiar with how to use music to learn English, they can continue their learning individually and independently. Music reports are an effective tool to guide them through analyzing a song. In this assignment, students are required to pick a song and examine it from various aspects. For example, they are first asked to explain why they chose the song. Then they must summarize the main points of the lyrics. They are also asked to research background information about the song (when and where it was released) and the artist (group members, where they are from, history, other hit songs, etc.). Next, students write their emotional responses to the song by selecting their favorite lyrics or explaining the message of the song. Finally, they discuss if they can recommend the song to other classmates and why.

This is a great assignment for several reasons. First of all, it enhances students' autonomy because they can choose the song they want to study and learn it at their own pace. Also, this puts students in control of content and increases student motivation. By having a choice of the material they analyze, students can make an emotional connection to the song and the artist. Additionally, it gives students an opportunity to share some of their favorite songs with classmates and the instructor. Most importantly, by completing this task, students will acquire skills that they can use to become independent learners and continue

to use music that is accessible in their lives for their life-long learning.

### **Music presentation**

Giving a music presentation also provides students with a good opportunity to integrate all the skills and knowledge they have learned in class. Unlike the music reports, this is more of a project rather than an assignment since students spend several weeks working to complete the task and presenting the results at the end. Also, this is a group project which students complete with classmates.

In this assignment, each group of three to four students chooses a musician or band and one song from that artist that they want to present. Students research information about the song and the singer/ band, create PowerPoint slides to display all the information in a dynamic and multimedia format, and finally show it to the whole class in the form of a speech. Students report information about the artist they chose, provide a summary of the song, identify their favorite lyrics and provide their own interpretation, and describe their reactions to the song.

This project enhances cooperative learning and encourages teamwork since students must collaborate, negotiate, and depend on each other. When students are completing this task and presenting the material, they have more opportunities to exhibit their skills beyond English such as technology, research, and group or interpersonal skills. Instructors have an opportunity to observe any of these abilities that they don't normally see in regular classroom activities. It also provides students with opportunities to become familiar with technology and presentation skills. Finally and most importantly, this assignment gives them a chance to recycle key skills from the course with the assistance of the instructor and their peers.

### **New media technology**

Music has long been a component of the language classroom because of its ability to enhance language learning. However, more recently, developments in media technology have made it easier than ever to find, access, and share music in both a personalized and social way. A simple search engine enquiry can give access to lyrics, pictures, and information about the musician or band. In many cases, free streamed songs are offered on artists' personal websites or through social networking sites such as Myspace. Additionally, the ability to access free streaming videos is common on such sites as Youtube.

Nowadays, music is easier than ever to find. Gone are the days of searching and scouring the local record and CD shops for the perfect song or album to share with class. Internet pay sites, like Apple's iTunes, AmazonMP3, Napster and Emusic just to name a few, offer libraries of songs that can be downloaded directly to your personal computer or personal listening device for less than the cost of buying an entire album. These songs can be transferred into multiple formats and carried on a variety of portable music players or data storage devices making it easy for students and teachers to share their collections.

Even more recently, internet radio and social networking music sites have become a popular way to listen, upload and share music libraries and playlists with a community of listeners. Examples include such sites such as Imeem, Lastfm, and Facebook's recent foray into social networking through music. With these sites, music is shared in a multimedia smorgasbord that includes videos, rankings, polls, and related songs/artists, and connects you to other users with similar interests. This creates a much more interactive way to share and enjoy music within a community.

Finally, the ability to share your favorite artist or song can be greatly enhanced using presentation software such as PowerPoint or Google Docs. With presentation software, it is easy to

integrate sound, images, and video into a dynamic classroom presentation.

More than ever, the options for collecting, sharing, presenting, and studying language through music is expanding with media technology. These technologies can greatly enhance the use of music in the language classroom by promoting a student-centered approach and encouraging students' independent learning.

## Conclusion

Several research articles provide evidence to show that music is an effective teaching material for language learning. It has affective benefits for students in that it helps them to feel motivated, attentive, and comfortable in the language classroom. Music also provides the themes, topics, and the personalized authentic content that students can relate to. Linguistically, students will be exposed to various aspects of sounds, such as segmentals and suprasegmentals. Students can learn various sound changes and how to interpret emotional meanings from the tone and intonation of a song.

Music no longer serves as just a supplement to instruction, but can be a main source of material for a language class. There are effective ways to teach a song beyond simple gap-fill or cloze. Numerous activities and projects can be implemented depending on the level and objectives of the course. Technological developments in recent years have made it possible for students to have easier access to materials and for instructors to be more creative than ever.

## Bio data

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