

Storybook Project: From lyrics & music to stories

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**PAC3
at
JALT
2001**

**Conference
Proceedings**



**International
Conference
Centre**

**Kitakyushu
JAPAN**

**November
22-25, 2001**

Most poems and lyrics contain messages or themes. Some are powerful and encouraging; some are sad love stories; some reflect problems that we face in the present world. In the "Storybook Project," these message or theme aspects of lyrics, especially of pop/rock songs in English, are utilized to give language learners the opportunity to understand and explore social issues by amplifying the theme. This project also aims at developing the learners' language skills in the process of creating stories. This article will illustrate this project with its goals, procedures, and sample material and discuss some benefits and challenges as well.

詩や歌詞の中にはメッセージや何らかのテーマを含んでいるものが多い。その中には力強く、勇気づけられるものもあれば、悲恋物語もあるし、私達が現代社会で直面している問題について述べているものもある。「ストーリーブック・プロジェクト」は特に英語のポップ・ロック音楽とその詩に含まれるメッセージ性とストーリー性を利用し、学習者にこれらの音楽を利用して物語を作らせることで社会問題に触れさせる機会を与え、さらに物語を作成しながら学習者の言語能力も伸ばすということを目的としている。本稿ではこのプロジェクトの目的、手順、教材見本などを例示しながら、このプロジェクトの利点・課題について論ずる。

It is not easy for EFL teachers to teach thinking skills in English because most EFL learners have difficulty enough developing language skills. The “Storybook Project” was designed to integrate both the improvement of language skills and thinking skills in the classroom.

There are two main purposes of this project: (a) to familiarize learners with social issues by utilizing theme and story aspects in pop/rock songs, (b) to give them the opportunity to be creative, analytical, and expressive in English by creating a story using the lyrics as inspiration.

This paper will explain the background of this project, its goals, procedures, benefits and challenges. Sample material will be provided as well.

Background of the “Storybook Project” *The Importance of Creative Thinking*

In this project, creative thinking was emphasized. In order to understand and think critically about social issues, students need to be creative and constructive in order to seek diverse possibilities of the topic (de Bono, 1993, pp. 169-170). After they understand the basic issue, critical thinking skills are used to probe more deeply.

The Reasons for Using Pop/Rock Songs

There are authentic materials that are suitable for teaching social issues, but they are sometimes too difficult for students to learn the language itself. In

contrast, advantages in using pop/rock songs are:

- (a) young people love music, and thus are motivated to learn language;
- (b) they are usually short and present a controversial topic in a simple way via music and lyrics;
- (c) some also have a good storyline that encourages students to investigate an issue and to create a story; and
- (d) they are flexible and helpful in teaching language skills and cultural-awareness as well as social issues.

The “Storybook Project” *Goals*

The goals of the “Storybook Project” are:

- (a) to develop learners’ language skills,
- (b) to familiarize learners with social issues through pop/rock songs, and
- (c) to enhance learners’ creative thinking skills by having them create a story inspired by the lyrics and discuss the issues behind them.

Teacher’s Preparation

1. Select songs for the “Music of the Month.”

Songs in this project should have appropriate themes for students to understand and discuss. Regarding the theme selection, it is possible that a teacher’s decision is

biased or different from the one which artists originally intended, yet there are two conceivable categorizations:

- (a) *Artists' subjectivity*: artists themselves present the theme of a song via the media such as magazines, their works or the Internet.
- (b) *Listeners' subjectivity*: there may be a specific theme intended by artists that is not clear to listeners, in which case, the theme determination is entrusted to them.

Songs should have clear and comprehensible story elements as well that encourage students to create their original stories. They should have characters, incidents, and possibilities that inspire students to explore the topic and imagine what might happen next.

2. How to present a song and the issue in the song.

It is ideal to use one song per month because students can learn language skills and deeply understand the social issues behind the song. However, songs are insufficient to cover detailed information on the topic. Therefore, the teacher should decide how to introduce the issues, and whether supplementary materials or statistical evidence are needed to help students to understand the topic better.

Appendix I gives information about materials used in this project.

Procedures

• *[Week 1 & 2] Vocabulary-building, gap-filling, reading, and singing aloud*

Students are given a vocabulary-building sheet, song sheet with gap-filling, and storybook worksheet. After the vocabulary building and gap filling, they read aloud the lyrics focusing on the pronunciation and intonation, and sing aloud understanding the content of the song (see Appendix II for sample material).

• *[Week 3] Discussion about the storyline of the song*

Students are divided into groups and discuss the storyline of the song—e.g. characters and their relationships, the incident's background, what would happen next (not in the lyrics), etc—to create a story inspired by lyrics.

• *[Week 4] Creating a basic story and after-story*

As students construct a basic story using lyrics, they imagine and create the “after-story,” visualizing what would happen to the person/people in the song after that. Students are allowed to share their ideas with classmates, but must create their own story.

• *Revision*

Revisions are made inside or outside of the class until the stories are cohesive and coherent. The teacher can guide this process with WH questions about the story

to help students write more deeply and creatively (see Appendix III for a student's story).

Benefits of the “Storybook Project”

While doing this project, students said things like, “It is very difficult. It takes a lot of time to organize my ideas and put it into my story,” or “I can’t do it.” However, when everything was done, their feedback to the question “What did you learn in this class?” showed the positive and beneficial aspects of this project.

Examples of students’ comments

- It was really difficult to express my feelings in English, and I realized how poor I was at writing. The themes of each song were really difficult. I had difficulty understanding them, but as I listened, I unconsciously hummed them and began to analyze them. So it was good for me to pronounce English correctly and think about something from many viewpoints.
- The teacher’s revisions and corrections were really helpful and encouraged me to write more. I felt I could do that.
- The more I wrote, the easier I felt it was to write English. The story-making assignment was helpful in improving my English skills.

From these responses, I can say the benefits of this project are:

1. Students learn new vocabulary and language in current contexts, and practice using it as they create stories.
2. Students share insights and opinions with one another, thus broadening their viewpoints, and discovering deeper meanings in the song. Together, they can organize their ideas for a story, making the class a very interactive place.
3. Students are free to explore various possibilities about issues and stories. They may even generate new ideas that even the teacher had not imagined, thus lending spice to the discussion.
4. Students write more, encouraged by the teacher’s constructive feedback.
5. Students gain confidence in learning English both independently and cooperatively.

Challenges

Careful theme and material selection are important and necessary.

When dealing with sensitive issues such as domestic violence or child abuse, it is important for teachers to keep in mind that some students are not willing to share their opinions with others, because the situation sometimes has a personal significance for them. In case

such a situation occurs, have a song with a different theme ready to switch to as an alternative.

A teacher should facilitate discussion.

Some students may have difficulty discussing in English and so remain quiet. In that case, students should be allowed some time in their native language to help them organize their ideas for the discussion. In contrast, as the discussion develops, others' ideas may confuse some students. It is important for a teacher to monitor closely to keep them on the track.

Conclusion

The “Storybook Project” is advantageous in that it motivates students to explore social issues and develop their language skills in practical ways. But the most successful factor of this project is that students gain confidence in their English by creating stories about difficult issues. It is important for a teacher to create an environment where they can be creative and expressive. The “Storybook Project” can provide such an environment and give them the chance to explore unknown worlds.

References

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Appendix I: Material Selection

Song Title	Artist	Theme (Theme determination)	Supplementary material
<i>She Gave Her Angels</i> (1997, disc 3, track 4)	♂ ("Prince")	Unconditional love (LS) Abortion (students' idea)	"Love Cures People" (Crawford, 1996, pp. 186-187) "To Remember Me" (Test, 1996, pp. 110-111)
<i>Two Beds and a Coffee Machine</i> (1999, track 9)	Savage Garden	Domestic violence (AS)	"Finding My Wings" (Augustine, 1996, pp. 232-234) "Little Red Wagon" (Lorenz, 1996, pp. 111-114)
<i>Bohemian Rhapsody</i> (1993, track 11)	Queen	Juvenile crime (LS)	None
<i>Space Oddity</i> (1999, track 1)	David Bowie	Space travel (LS)	None

(LS= Listeners' Subjectivity. AS= Artists' Subjectivity)

Appendix II: Sample Material

Two Beds and A Coffee Machine

(from *Affirmation* [1999]) Savage Garden

And she takes another step
 Slowly she opens the door
 Check that he is sleeping
 (1. _____)(_____) all the broken glass
 and (2. _____) on the floor
 Been up half the night screaming now it's time to get away
 Pack up the kids in the car
 Another (3. _____) to try and hide
 Another (4. _____) to write

Chorus:

Another (5. _____) in the road
 You keep moving
 Another stop sign
 You keep moving on
 And the years (6. _____)(_____) so fast
 Wonder how I ever (7. _____)(_____)(_____)

And there are children to think of
 Baby's asleep in the back seat
 Wonder how they'll ever (7. _____)(_____)(_____)
 this (8. _____) (9. _____)
 But the mind is an amazing thing
 Full of candy dreams and new toys and another cheap hotel

Two beds and a coffee machine
 But there are (10. _____) to buy
 And she knows she'll have to go home

Chorus:

Another (3. _____) to try and hide
 Another (4. _____) to write
 Another lonely highway in the black of night
 But there's hope in the darkness
 You know you're going to (11. _____)(_____)

Another (5. _____) in the road
 You keep moving
 Another stop sign
 You keep moving on
 And the years (6. _____)(_____) so fast
 Silent (12. _____) built to (13. _____)
 Wonder how I ever (11. _____)(_____)(_____)

Written by Darren Hayes & Daniel Jones

[Vocabulary Check]

次の英語の意味に合う日本語を線で結びなさい

- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------|
| 1. alibi ・ | ・ 1. ～を切り抜ける |
| 2. bruise ・ | ・ 2. 悪夢 |
| 3. ditch ・ | ・ 3. あざ |
| 4. fortress ・ | ・ 4. 言い訳 |
| 5. furniture ・ | ・ 5. 生き生きした、生の |
| 6. to go by ・ | ・ 6. 家具 |
| 7. grocery ・ | ・ 7. 食料品 |
| 8. to last ・ | ・ 8. 過ぎる |
| 9. living ・ | ・ 9. 成功する、間に合う |
| 10. to make it ・ | ・ 10. 拾い上げる |
| 11. to make it through ・ | ・ 11. 溝、水路 |
| 12. nightmare ・ | ・ 12. 持ちこたえる |
| 13. to pick up ・ | ・ 13. 要塞、堅固な場所 |

[Discussion & Homework]

1. Do vocabulary check.
2. Listen to the song twice and fill in the gaps.
3. Listen again and try to understand the lyrics.
4. Discuss the following questions in groups.
 A: Characters in this song (Who are they? What are they like?, etc. You can name them if you like.)
 B: Storyline. Write your own story considering the following:
 (a) What happened before the song?
 (b) How is it happening?
 (c) Why does the woman have to leave home with her children?
 (d) How is she feeling when she drives the car?
 (e) What does “Two Beds and a Coffee Machine” stand for?
5. Create your own story in English using the plot of question #4.
6. Complete your original story with extra information not in the song.

Appendix III: A Student's Story

Note: The first part of the story describes how Kate and Mike met, their happy days, and how domestic violence started... The following is the rest of the story.

Chigusa's Story

Mike's violence continued. One day, after Kelly was abused, she saw her son's sleeping face and the tears fell down on her face. She decided to escape from Mike for her son and herself. She checked if he was sleeping and packed a few things, left a note for him, took Sonny, and ran away by car. She kept moving even if the road had a ditch and if she saw the stop sign. She didn't know what to do, but in her mind many memories crossed and she passed through his violence with a little fortress which protected herself. She kept moving. She looked at Sonny who was sleeping in the back seat and thought about Sonny's dream. Maybe in his dream there were full of candy, many toys and cheap hotel where they were going. She cried a lot. They reached a small motel. She took Sonny to bed and sat down. She was very tired but couldn't sleep. When the morning came, she thought she had to go back. She didn't know why, but she was back to be a woman, wife and mother.

On the way to go home, she was back to be an ordinary she.

When she went to the hospital again, she met a lawyer. He looked at her and noticed that she took violence from her husband. She was hurt a lot and cried. He came up to her and said, "Are you OK?" She didn't say anything, but he really worried about her. Everyday he came and talked with her, and then she opened her mind little by little. First, she didn't talk about her husband. He suggested she should do something and decided to protect her and her son from her husband's violence. They brought the matter to justice to divorce. Her husband was really angry about that, but he could not come closer to her and Sonny. Sonny lived with Kate. They became a fatherless family, but had a happy life. When Sonny became bigger, he never had violence to his family.