

Using Music to Teach Grammar

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This workshop demonstrated how to use movie songs to make grammar teaching more appealing to the learners and more effective in language acquisition. Despite widespread adoption in EFL classes, songs have rarely been used with specific reference to the acquisition of grammar. Based on the presenters' experience of using songs in EFL classes, this workshop showed how to teach both word and sentence grammar in a number of ways. Techniques demonstrated included blank filling, multiple choice, matching, dialogue, and sentence making. Numerous movie songs in DVD format were gleaned to meet the illustrative purposes of this workshop. Rationale and guidelines with respect to using these various ways of using songs to teach grammar were also provided for best teaching and learning effect.

Introduction: A Personal Testimony

Inspired by the encouraging suggestions of their students, the presenters of this workshop began to use songs in their *English as a Foreign Language* (EFL) classes fourteen years ago at Chinese Culture University, Taipei, Taiwan. Since then, their use of songs in the classroom has undergone three stages of development and maturation. The first stage was the one in which

they adopted music straightforwardly and was with only a general purpose in mind. That is, songs were employed mostly for relaxation, for fun, and for hearing something different from the teacher's lecturing.

As years went by, the presenters, sensing that the direct use of songs seemed insufficient for apparent instructional effects, started seeking more meaningful ways of using songs in the EFL classroom, although they were still deemed as supplementary or subordinate to the textbook. At this stage, the adoption of songs for instruction was made mainly out of the presenters' own creation or imagination. One of the most frequently designed activities was blank filling, in which the students are asked to listen to the songs and fill out the missing words. The purposes attached to the song activities were quite limited, mainly for pronunciation or listening drills.

Over the past five years, the presenters commenced looking for reinforcement from the professionals, which sent them into the third stage of using music in the EFL classroom. For example, in May 2001, in Taipei they attended a workshop held by the world-renowned Carolyn Graham on using songs in the EFL classroom. In addition, they read widely those journal articles and books on teaching English through music. The use of songs now became more professional, focused on one specific segment or aspect of language learning for each song. Moreover, special emphasis was placed on

not only enhancement of student motivation but also relevancy of songs to the course objectives.

What we have known and done about adoption of songs for language acquisition is quite meager, and more possibilities and effective ways are still to be unveiled. This workshop aimed to introduce DVD technology and different sources of songs, and to demonstrate how to design various types of activities for using songs to teach grammar.

Literature on Using Songs to Teach Grammar

Like ice and fire, both grammar and songs are divergent in nature: One is full of regularities and even ice-cold boredom, while the other is full of fire-like emotions and inspirational melodies that enchant one. Nevertheless, the marrying of these two radically different elements into the family of language instruction has been proved successful. One of the examples is *Learning English by Singing* in which Professor Shih (1997) of Taiwan collected 101 songs with commentaries and general instructional guidelines. This book was targeted at the children or EFL beginners, although not specifically referring to grammar instruction. Another book *Singing, Chanting, Telling Tales* by Carolyn Graham (1992) also examined the use of songs to teach functions and structures. Moreover, in her *Using Authentic video in English Language Teaching: Tips for Taiwan's Teachers*, Professor Katchen (1996) of National Tsing-hwa

University in northern Taiwan examined music videos. She devoted one chapter to discussing the use of music videos for instruction in general, although grammar was only peripherally mentioned (99). Professor Fox (1995), in his “On Common Ground: Why and How to Use Music as a Teaching Aid,” pointed out the close tie between music and language acquisition from the perspective of therapy and religion. He also discussed how three EFL textbooks use songs to teach grammar (100). Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) went a step further to deepen the relationship of grammar and songs, providing useful selection guidelines, teaching procedure and examples. Perhaps nowhere has the bond between songs and grammar been more tightly bridged than Cranmer and Laroy (1993) who devoted one chapter to exploration of using music to teach grammar in their *Musical Openings: Using Music in the Language Classroom*. Eight types of using songs to teach grammar are enumerated with preparation, procedure, and suggestions very usefully and clearly made.

DVD Technology

The movie songs in the DVD format have the following four fundamental functions:

The Subtitles Function

This allows the user to select any of the subtitles already available on a given disc. Press the “Subtitles” button

and use the guide arrow to choose the desired subtitle option. Not every music disc, however, is installed with the subtitle function.

The Language Function

This allows for a selection of the output language type. Unfortunately, it can only produce the language as labeled on the cover page of the disc. There are always limitations according to each product sold. In English Karaoke, there are two choices, one with only English subtitles and rhyme, the other with English subtitles and sound.

The Advance Function

The Use of this function enables the user to skip to individual scenes or chapters on the disc. Most DVDs include a scene index, providing easy location of the required scene/chapter. The button labeled “Go To” or “Forward” typically provides the advance function. This function may also prove useful for various student-centered activities, such as asking learners to forward the chapter to a favorite song that they would like to learn.

Chapter Repeating Function

If the teacher intends to show a song many times with or without visual support, this function does help. When the song is being played for the first time, press this button, and it will be repeated as many times as needed.

This very powerful function enables the teacher to continuously repeat a single scene.

Different Sources of Songs

Songs are available from two main sources:

1. the audio channel, such as cassette tapes, CDs and DVDs
2. both audio and video channels, such as the musical DVDs and DVD films

Theme Songs in the Special/Extra Features

Most DVDs provide the function of extra/special features, such as theme songs, costumes galleries, behind the screens, posters, actors' background information, and commentaries. In the movie "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," for instance, inserted in DVD format is the theme song titled "A Love Before Time" sung by Co Co Lee in MTV style.

Live Concert in DVD Format

Most songs are presented by the original singers, for instance, "Charlotte Church: Voice of an Angel, Pavarotti" and "The Corrs." The students enjoy learning songs from the live concerts as they can witness the singers on the screen. As the live concert DVD musicals usually do not provide English subtitles or written scripts, the teacher can assign students to do the lyrics of their favorite songs. It is recommended that the song

be played three times, first with sound and image, next with sound only, and the third time with both or either.

English Karaoke

Songs in this type of DVD musical, sung by the original singers only in audio channel, are presented with background images either with sounds and subtitles or only with English subtitles, word by word, for the viewer to sing. Much cheaper than the live concert DVDs, the Karaoke DVD discs provide a wider variety and combination of songs, such as pop songs, movie theme songs, and old love songs. Besides, they provide English subtitles which students can take advantage of for singing and learning English.

Theme Songs in the Film

Most feature films present songs with the plot going on, so that the viewer can understand the background information of the song. However, this type of song usually is not shown in its entirety, so audiotapes or CDs are needed to play the complete song. It is recommended that this type of songs be played first with sound and image and the second or third times only with the sound through audio channel.

The four movie songs selected for this workshop are: "A Love Before Time" ("Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"); "Green, Green Grass of Home"; "How Do I Live" ("Con Air"); and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" ("Greasy").

Four Steps of Using Music to Teach Grammar

1. Pre-use or getting into media stage: Teacher selects grammatical points and song lyrics and design appropriate tasks or exercises.
2. Input or working from media stage: Teacher presents/elicits designated grammatical points.
3. Focus or working with media stage: Teacher plays the song and students are asked to do the exercise while listening to the tapes.
4. Transfer or working out of media stage: Teacher checks the answers and makes necessary explanation. Class discussion follows. Students are encouraged to ask questions and asked to do follow-up assignment by using what the media has just presented. (Adapted from Donna M. Brinton, 459)

Activity Design

Five types of activities based on the lyrics are introduced here: blank-filling, multiple-choice, matching, dialogues, and sentence making. The former three types are mechanic drills aimed at the conceptual instill and habituation of the targeted grammar, while the other two are communicative types of drills aimed at enhancing students' active and natural use of the language learned from the lyrics.

Blank-filling

Most widely used by the EFL teachers, the blank-filling exercise is especially suitable for recognizing the eight parts of speech. Each may be focused on practice of one or more grammatical points. Usually each blank has only one word to be filled, and the word may be guessed through both context and grammatical relationship. The blank may be followed by a cue in the parentheses. For example:

Fill in the blank with the appropriate verb form:

If the sky _____ (open) up for me, and the mountains _____ (disappear),

If the seas _____ (run) dry, _____ (turn) to dust and the sun _____ (refuse) to rise,

I would still find my way, by the light I see in your eyes.

The world I know _____ (fade) away, but you stay. ("A Love Before Time")

Multiple-choice

The multiple choice activity, which seems easier than blank-filling to design and to do, may be devised with two or more choices, and may be done before, during or after listening to the music. For example:

How do I get through one night without you

If I (have, had) to live without you

What kind of life (will, would) that be

Oh and I, I need you in my arms

Need you to hold

You're my world, my heart, my soul

If you ever (leave, left)

Baby you would take away everything good in my life. ("How Do I Live")

My true love was true.

Oh, I of course replied

Something here inside

Cannot be denied.

They said someday you'll find

All who love () are blind.

Oh, when your heart's on fire ()

You must realize

Smoke gets in your eyes (). ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes")

Matching

Another mechanical but frequently used exercise; the matching exercise usually consists of a list of words that have to go with the blanks in the selected lyric. The following example is a drill on recognizing the three types of clauses.

Match each underlined clause with one of the three types of clauses listed in the front:

- A. Noun Clause
- B. Adjective Clause
- C. Adverbial Clause

They asked me how I know ()

Dialogues

Students are asked to produce dialogues based on the grammatical elements of the song heard. They have to gain a considerable understanding of the grammatical components of the song before making meaningful dialogues. For example, the dialogue assignment of the song "A Love Before Time" may be: Write eight to ten sentences of dialogues between two lovers who would most likely be talking to each other as revealed in the song. There is much room for students to exercise their imagination and for the teacher to expect various dialogues.

Sentence-making

Aimed at putting students' sense of sentence into practice, this exercise may be designed by imitating some of the grammatical elements or structures of the sentences in the song. The song serves as a point of departure for making similar or better sentences. The sentence structures of the lyrics must be well grasped before they can be used for sentence making by the students. Take "Green, Green Grass of Home." There is one sentence "Down the road I look, and there runs Mary/Hair of gold and lips like cherries," which includes several grammatical elements that worth being drilled, such as the reverse sentence structure ("down the road I look" and "there runs Mary"), the compound sentence, the adjective phrase ("of gold") and simile ("like cherries"). Students may be asked to make similar sentences by imitating one or more or all of the grammatical components of the above sentence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both presenters would like to claim, first, that an EFL teacher does not have to be a good singer or musician to use songs in the classroom. Next, we recommend that we make every song pedagogically meaningful and purposeful. Third, it is very important to grasp the fundamental qualities and special traits of songs before we can make the best of them to meet our demands. Finally, in selection and use of songs, we must take into account such factors as student backgrounds and relevancy to the course syllabus, and linguistic skills to be trained. It is only when these aspects are aptly weighed can we enhance student learning motivation, and bring English learning by songs from a relaxing and lively process to a fruitful effect.

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