

Using Songs in the ESL/EFL Class

By Noreen Cross

Music can bring a whole new dimension to class. Even using a song as a filler can be motivating to students who really enjoy music. (I don't think there are too many students out there who don't enjoy listening to music.) Songs provide language input, which is an essential element in language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Songs also reflect culture, which plays a significant role in language learning. They usually contain themes surrounding a topic or issue that provide context for learning vocabulary. Songs have been known to be a negative source of content for learning grammar, however, if well chosen, songs can be a valuable source of grammar reinforcement. Listening skills can also be enhanced through songs as they provide students with practice in listening to varying forms of intonation, and rhythm, which is very important in language acquisition. Being a form of discourse, songs, naturally extend speaking into a new context through the sung word. (Murphey, 1992).

Even though musical tastes can be quite varied in a class, I find if you identify the purpose behind using the song, the students will look beyond the style of the music. Whether it be learning contrastive adjectives, practicing second conditionals, talking about the theme of aging, or practicing sentence stress, students naturally get into the song through the language point. Some ideas I have used with young international upper beginner to upper intermediate adult students are:

- *Hand in My Pocket*-Alanis Morissette –The song consists of many contrastive adjectives such as “I am young, but I’m wise”, “I’m broke, but I’m happy”, “ I free, but I’m focused,” etc. This song actually fits the cloze type exercise of which I take out part of the contrastive pair. I write all the missing words on the page around the song. I usually do this song as a discovery activity where I don't give them meanings of the words, but let them try to discover the meaning through the context of the contrastive adjective as we listen to the song. After the students have listened a couple times, I let them check with each other to compare their answers. Then we go over the answers and check general understanding of the words. I then give them a matching exercise with all the words I think they might have difficulty with to reconfirm the meanings. We then listen to the song again and sing it. After the song, I get the students to talk about themselves or people in their lives and what kind of adjectives from the song would describe themselves at the moment.
- *If I had a Million Dollars* – The Barenaked Ladies- I use this song in two respects-as a listening activity and for practicing second conditionals. I choose ten or so words from the song and write them on the board along with four other words which are not in the song. The students write down the words in their notebooks. I then play the song two times and students are to circle the words they hear the first time and then put them in the correct order the second time. After that, we go over the meanings of the words/expressions/concepts that might be difficult. Then, I have the students write down 3 things they would like to do if they had a million dollars and share them with the class/small groups. Finally,

- they choose one of their ideas, we listen to the song again and when we get to the chorus parts the students insert their own ideas. So, the whole class would sing: “If I had a million dollars, I’d travel around the world., etc. The students always have a laugh and after a couple of students, I turn off the music and the students all continue until everyone has had a chance to say their idea.
- *100 years- Five for Fighting-* This song has a great melody and portrays the various stages of life and ideas associated with them. It starts with the age 15 and goes through various ages of life up to 99 years. I first do a listening activity where the students are given a verse of the song (students can pair up). The students are to listen to the song and stand in the correct order according to their verses. A couple of the verses are almost exactly the same, so I tell them to listen carefully. After ordering the song, I give the students a set of discussion questions related to aging. Example: At what ages did you expect to get married and have children when you were young? Have your ideas about marriage and children changed since then? The singer sings about a mid-life crises when he’s 45. What is a mid-life crisis? Etc. I then extend this into discussing the meanings of different age-related expressions like “coming of age”, “the information age”, “in ages”, etc.
 - *Tom’s Diner-Suzanne Vega-*This song is good for emphasizing sentence stress. The song is about a woman in a diner telling the story of what’s happening in the dinner that day. There are a lot of prepositions and articles. A sample line of the story is: “I am sitting in the morning at the diner on the corner.” The prepositions are taken out and students have to listen and fill in the blanks. After listening a couple of times and checking the answers, students can then listen to the words that are stressed in the sentences. This would be a good time to talk about sentence stress and ask students what kinds of words they think are usually stressed in sentences. (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc.).

Songs can be a useful and very enjoyable tool in teaching English, but they aren’t for every class. Choosing songs that are comprehensible with fairly straightforward themes is better than obscure and complex songs. Of course, this also depends on the level of your students. You are not always trying to find the meaning of the song, but it is good for the students to have some sense of the song to make it more meaningful. Another way to extend the use of songs in class is to talk a bit about the background of the musical artist(s) behind the song. It can take the students to another level of culture and English outside of the class.

I hope you have found some of these ideas useful to you and I am sure you can adapt and extend the ideas to suit your own needs. There are so many ideas for using music in class, and a book I highly recommend is Tim Murphey’s, *Music and Song*, which I have referenced below.

References:

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition in the Classroom*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Murphey, T. (1992). *Music and song*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.