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# Teaching English Through Songs

Mehran Sabet

## Introduction

Music is an integral part of any culture or society. There is no human society without its music. It is a powerful force for both cultural cohesion and identity and for individual fulfillment (Murphy, 1995). Using songs and music to teach English is nothing new to many teachers. It is a motivational tool that can make the teaching fun, the lessons less stressful and give the students more reasons to attend and participate in the classroom activities with enthusiasm. Teachers do not have to be musicians or good singers to introduce songs in their classrooms. All they need to do is to acknowledge the fact that their students want to listen to songs and show the willingness to accommodate their wish.

There are teachers who hesitate or flatly reject the idea of using songs in their classes. They use excuses such as:

- It is not serious teaching.
- It is too noisy and disturbs other teachers and classes.
- The administration does not like it.
- The lyrics are difficult to understand.
- I do not have time for this kind of teaching. It does not fit into my syllabus.
- I have never done it and do not know how to do it.

While some of these reasons could be understandable, they are not sufficient enough for rejecting the whole idea and not considering it seriously. Music and songs are such powerful and motivational elements that every teacher can benefit from them by including them in his/her regular syllabus and lesson plans.

## Why songs?

Every year this writer hands out questionnaires to his students at the end of each academic year in order to get their input and opinion on various activities that they did in the classroom. They are asked to rank each activity based on its usefulness and positive influence on learning. Without any exception, listening to songs has always been the top rated activity among this writer's classes for the past ten years. A closer look at songs and how they can be utilized in teaching reveals that they can be used to:

- add variety to a lesson
- increase motivation and create a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom
- help in practicing pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation
- help in practicing grammar items
- help in practicing new vocabulary
- help learners remember language in chunks
- provide reinforcement of language learning
- encourage listening practice
- offer a lot of cultural input

(Lakic, I. 2001)

Griffiee (1992) states that songs and music affect our emotions, speak to us directly about our experiences, reassure us in moments of trouble, and are a satisfying form of art. Miller (1999) also says that music awakens interest, evokes emotion, stimulates the imagination, stirs memories, banishes boredom, and creates a harmonious atmosphere in the classroom.

It is impossible to find someone who does not enjoy listening to some kind of music. People have their own tastes and preferences in what they listen to. It could be folk, pop, classical, jazz, country, rock, reggae, hip-hop etc. Nevertheless, everyone listens to one kind of music or another in order to relax or have an emotional uplift when the need arises.

Knowing how important the role of music is in the lives of our students, teachers should use this valuable tool to create a bridge between the pleasurable experience of listening/singing and its potential in teaching vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and other skills associated with language learning.

## **What songs to choose?**

Students can be a great resource in assisting their teachers to find and choose suitable songs. Their preferences and dislikes have a big influence on how successful the role of music in the classroom can be. If teachers are not sure what songs or singers are popular with the students, they should get their students' opinions and input through a short survey or a quick show of hands. Based on this writer's experience, pop music seems to be the most listened to kind of music among Japanese university students. American and British singers and groups are usually better known than most singers from other countries. Some famous performers such as the Carpenters and the Beatles are still very popular among students and their songs are very easy to understand and listen to.

The mass media in Japan, as in almost any other country, plays a major role in informing the public as to what or who is popular at any given time. Teachers also can ask their students to supply recordings of the songs to be played in the classroom. By doing so, the learners will have a direct responsibility for and influence on their own learning, and their participation in choosing the songs will ensure some degree of involvement and interest.

### **Some points to consider in selecting songs:**

- **Choose the kind of music that is popular with the students.**

Pop and rock music are by far the most popular kind of music among college age students. Although hip-hop is becoming increasingly popular among young Japanese, it is usually very difficult to understand the lyrics. Country and western music might be popular with some adult students, but this is hardly the case with college students.

- **Select songs with easy-to-understand lyrics.**

If the teacher's goal is to improve or check the students' listening ability, then song lyrics must be comprehensible to the learners. Even some

native speakers have difficulty understanding the lyrics of some songs. With that in mind, it would be unrealistic to expect our students to do any better than their teachers. Listening to songs should be a pleasant experience, motivating students as well as serving educational purposes. Based on this writer's personal experience, in a cloze-type listening activity, after listening to a song twice, it is safe to assume that the listening task has been too difficult for the learners if they can not supply more than eighty percent of the missing words.

- **Pay attention to the appropriateness of the language in the lyrics.**

Teachers must pay close attention to this point. There are many songs that are inappropriate for use in a classroom. Foul language and sexual references can be found in some songs, especially in hard rock music. Although some students may be listening to these kinds of songs every day, it is doubtful that many of them really understand every word or its meaning. Assuming that some teachers, to some extent, have to explain the lyrics to their students, the situation created, can be very unpleasant and awkward for everyone involved.

- **Choose songs that are popular with the students, not the teacher.**

Teachers must remember that students are the intended audience. Therefore, their interest and preference takes priority over that of the teacher. A teacher might assume that his/her students would be interested in the type of music that he/she enjoys listening to, but this assumption must be confirmed before it is applied in class. By simply asking the students whether they are interested in listening to a particular song or singer in the classroom, teachers can accommodate the needs of all participants. People's tastes can change as they get older. A student in his/her forties might still be interested in pop music, but he/she may be even more interested in listening to a singer that was popular during his/her youth. A teacher in his/her forties or fifties might still have records and tapes of his/her favorite singer at home, and possibly listens to them every day, but most teenage students may never have heard of the singer. The best advice for teachers is to stay up-to-date with the trends and fashions of the day.

Overall, choosing an appropriate song is not an easy task. There are

many factors that need to be considered and the above-mentioned points are the main criteria that this writer has kept in mind when selecting songs for his classes.

## **The lyrics**

The most common question among teachers who might be interested in introducing songs in their classroom might be how they can acquire the lyrics of a song. One way, is by listening to the song and writing them down. It is a time consuming task and can produce less than perfect results. Some songs or parts of them are very difficult to understand even for native speakers. In order to solve this problem and also save some time and headaches, teacher's use of the Internet is one solution. By following the proper procedure, it is relatively easy to acquire the lyrics of almost any song through the Internet. Another relatively easy but slightly costly way of finding the lyrics of a song is by renting or buying the CD or the tape. The lyrics are usually printed and included in the package. However, teachers are highly advised to match the printed lyrics with the actual song by listening while reading the lyrics. There have been numerous times where this writer has found discrepancies between the printed lyrics and the song itself. The differences might be minor, a few words here and there, but there is no justification for this lack of effort on the teachers' part if it can be avoided. The students usually point out these mistakes to their teachers, which could be embarrassing but avoidable with minimal effort.

## **Songs as a language learning aid**

After or before selecting a song, teachers should ask themselves why they want to play a particular song in their class. In other words, what are the benefits, for the students, of listening to the song. Of course, considering the students interest in music, the motivational factor can be just that. However, by incorporating a motivational factor into the educational goals of the lesson, teachers can expand and broaden their arm in reaching those

goals.

Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and improving students' listening skills have been some key points that this writer has targeted when using songs in the classroom. With some careful planning and preparation, it is indeed very possible to make the lessons fun as well as educational and meaningful for the students.

### **Songs and listening — cloze-type**

This is the most common form of listening practice that this writer has used (Appendix One). The first step is to listen to the song and decide which words the teacher wants to leave out of a cloze-type exercise. The speed of a song plays a big role in deciding how many words and how far apart the words should be left out. This really depends on the proficiency level of the students. The teacher is the best judge of that. In a slow song, a word can be left blank in every line, where in a fast song, eliminating a word in every other line might be more appropriate. However, if the song is too fast and we leave out only a few words from the lyrics, we are not giving our students much of a listening practice.

It is also very important for the missing words to be comprehensible to the students. By listening to the song in advance, a teacher should decide whether or not the majority of his/her students are going to be able to understand and write the missing words. This is a time consuming process that requires a lot of experience, but it is worth the effort since the same song can be used year after year with new students and still keep its freshness and motivational elements.

Once the making of a cloze-type exercise is finished, the teacher can start seeing the fruits of his/her hard work. This writer starts the process by handing out copies of the song to the students. A little history of the song such as the name of the singer, when it was released, what movie it was played in (if any), how long it was number one when released (if it was) etc. might be helpful and stimulating for the students. The song is played once and students fill in the blanks as they listen to it. It is played a second time for slower students and also for confirming the already written answers.

Then, the answers are written on the board and the song is played for a third and last time. Although the students have the answers, the intention behind playing the song for the third time is to give the learners one more chance to hear and see what they missed. Based on this writer's experience, playing the song two times for the students before giving them the answers seems to be the most appropriate and efficient method.

If the students can write most or all of the answers in one listening, this could indicate that the task has been too easy for them. On the other hand, playing the song three times has not shown any significance progress compared with playing it two times, in this writer's classes. If a student can't hear a word correctly by listening to it twice, it is very unlikely that he/she will be able understand it by listening to it three times or more (Sabet, 1999).

### **Songs and listening — scrambled sentences**

In this type of listening, you can type a song with the lyrics in a different order and have the students put them in the correct order as they listen to it. Teachers should keep in mind that the song should not be too fast for students to follow. Also, it would make the task more achievable if the lyrics are broken down into chunks and then the lines in each chunk are put in a different order (Appendix Two). This task can become very challenging and burdensome if the learners are asked to do the whole song in one try. Fun activities, when they become too difficult or confusing for the students, can lose their effectiveness and original purpose.

Another way is to cut the lyrics into strips of paper and give the strips to individual or groups of students and ask them to put the lyrics in the correct order. The students should be able to complete the task after listening to the song once or twice.

Teachers can make this activity more challenging by asking their students to unscramble the song before listening to it. This means reading in context, and the activity will challenge the learners to activate their overall English ability in order to solve the problem. Once the students have finished the task or can not go any further, the teacher can play the song while the learners check their answers. This type of activity can give variety



to the lessons and make learning more stimulating.

## **Songs and listening — pronunciation**

There are numerous English textbooks that introduce the students to the natural forms of spoken English through pronunciation activities. This is meant to familiarize the learners with the way English is spoken in the real world. Although the learners may not be able to produce the natural forms themselves, understanding what others are saying can be a major contributor in improving their communication competence.

One form of pronunciation practice is to introduce the students to a “relaxed speech pattern” or “reduced form” of spoken English through various drills and listening activities. This writer has used a listening book called “whaddaya say?” by Nina Weinstein in some of his classes. The textbook emphasizes the slow and fast pronunciation of certain words in spoken English (e. g. *want to, going to, would like, can you, you, your* etc.) and tries to familiarize the learners with the natural spoken form used by the native speakers of English. Students are introduced to both forms at the beginning of each lesson. Then they are given some listening practice at the next stage, and finally are asked to listen and write the missing words in a cloze-type exercise with the key words (e. g. *want to, going to, can you, you, your, etc.*) missing. In order to supplement the textbook and enforce the main focus of each lesson, this writer searched and found songs whose contents match the teaching objectives of the listening textbook. Upon completion of each lesson, a song emphasizing the same key listening points (cloze-type) is played in the classroom. The students listen and write the missing words (Appendix Three). It is important to keep in mind that when eliminating some key words from the text, not only the targeted words but also some other neutral words are omitted from the lyrics so that the listening task becomes more challenging and not too predictable.

## Songs and listening — grammar

Many students find grammar boring, too difficult, uncommunicative and simply not fun to study. There are also some oral communication teachers who are unwilling to devote any of their classroom time to teaching grammar. Although many of the above mentioned reasons for disliking grammar can be justified, there is no denying that it plays a big role in any language acquisition.

Songs can be a rich source of material for studying and reviewing grammar. Most songs use a variety of grammatical structures, but when chosen carefully, teachers can find songs that supplement certain grammatical points being taught in their classes. Murphy (1995) has a “grammatical categories” list in his *Music & Song* book that provides teachers with a list of songs along with their main grammatical points and tenses. This could serve as a starting point for many instructors in considering this teaching method. Present tense, simple past, past perfect, and pronouns are just a few examples of grammar points that teachers teach implicitly or explicitly in their classroom.

For more advanced students, the key words, emphasizing certain grammatical points, can be left out from the lyrics and written on the board randomly. Students read the lyrics and try to fill in the missing words using their background knowledge along with the grammar being introduced, taught or reviewed in the classroom.

For lower level students, a multiple choice type activity might work better (Appendix Four). First, learners circle one of the two possible choices, then check their answers with a partner or as a small group, and finally listen to the song for verification.

The stage where the students check their answers with a partner can serve as a peer-teaching opportunity where they have to negotiate and rationalize their choices in order to come to a logical and reasonable conclusion. Since most people have a better ability to memorize words or phrases through the lyrics of a song than learning them in isolation, the inclusion of teaching grammar through songs seems to be a natural and

stimulating activity.

## **Songs and vocabulary**

Vocabulary is a major component and contributor to any language being learned or taught. As educators, teachers are always in search of activities that can increase new vocabulary input and facilitate its rate of retention. Finding a song that relates to the teachers' objectives, in terms of teaching or reviewing certain words, can be a daunting task. However, if instructors come across a song that contains at least some of the key words that they are hoping to focus on, developing an activity based on those words can serve the purpose as well as being a great source of meaningful input and a motivational factor. Even if the missing words in a song have no particular relationship to our teaching objectives, the mere fact of students focusing on the contents of the lyrics and trying to fit the words into the text, can serve as an effective use of classroom time.

In this type of activity, the list of missing words can be given to the students and the learners, first individually, and then in small groups to decide what the correct answers are and complete the task (Appendix Five). Once the final decision regarding the correct answers has been made by the students, the teacher plays the song and the learners check their answers.

## **Conclusion**

There are some teachers and students who think that learning a language must be laborious and painful. If an activity is joyful and amusing, then there is no room for it in a serious classroom. However, Stevick (1971) states that other things being equal, a language course is effective in proportion to the breadth of its contact with the student's interests, and the depth of its penetration into his/her emotional life.

There is no question that songs can be highly motivational and memorable for teaching different aspects of a language and its culture. Music is part of our lives and by integrating it into lessons, teachers can

create an atmosphere where songs can facilitate language learning and acquisition in more than one way. For teachers who are hesitant and reluctant to use songs in their classrooms, this writer suggests trying it once and getting feedback from the students. Although the activities suggested here are just a small sample of what can be done with songs in the classroom, as to how far and to what extent educators want to employ this teaching tool, the opportunities and options are bound only by the teachers' imagination and creativity.

Instead of sticking to the normal and routine teaching methods that teachers have always felt comfortable with, it might be worth taking a small risk trying to find out what might motivate the students and increase their level of participation in the classroom.

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**Appendix One**  
**My Heart Will Go On (Celine Dion)**

Every night in my **1)** \_\_\_\_\_  
I see you, I **2)** \_\_\_\_\_ you  
That is how I **3)** \_\_\_\_\_ you go on

Far across the **4)** \_\_\_\_\_  
And spaces **5)** \_\_\_\_\_ us  
You have come to **6)** \_\_\_\_\_ you go on

**\* Repeat**

Near, far, **7)** \_\_\_\_\_ you are  
I **8)** \_\_\_\_\_ that the heart does **9)** \_\_\_\_\_ on  
Once **10)** \_\_\_\_\_ you open the **11)** \_\_\_\_\_  
And you're **12)** \_\_\_\_\_ in my heart  
And my heart will go on and on

Love can **13)** \_\_\_\_\_ us one time  
And last for a **14)** \_\_\_\_\_  
And never let go till we're **15)** \_\_\_\_\_

Love was **16)** \_\_\_\_\_ I loved you  
One true time I **17)** \_\_\_\_\_ you  
And my life will **18)** \_\_\_\_\_ go on

**\* Repeat**

You're here, there's nothing I **19)** \_\_\_\_\_  
And I **20)** \_\_\_\_\_ that my heart will go on  
We'll **21)** \_\_\_\_\_ forever this way  
You're **22)** \_\_\_\_\_ in my heart  
And my heart will go on and on

**Appendix Two**  
**Beauty and the Beast (Celine Dion/Peobo Bryson)**

**Listen to the song and put the lyrics in the correct order.**

- \_\_\_\_\_ A tale as old as time
- \_\_\_\_\_ Just a little change
- \_\_\_\_\_ Barely even friends
- \_\_\_\_\_ Neither one prepared
- \_\_\_\_\_ Small to say the least
- \_\_\_\_\_ True as it can be
- \_\_\_\_\_ Beauty and the Beast
- \_\_\_\_\_ Then somebody bends, unexpectedly
- \_\_\_\_\_ Both a little strange

**\* Repeat**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Ever just as sure
- \_\_\_\_\_ Even just the same
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ever as before
- \_\_\_\_\_ As the sun will rise
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ever a surprise

**\* Repeat**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Finding you can change
- \_\_\_\_\_ Tale as old as time
- \_\_\_\_\_ Bittersweet and strange
- \_\_\_\_\_ Tune as old as song
- \_\_\_\_\_ Learning you were wrong
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ Beauty and the Beast
- \_\_\_\_\_ Tale as old as time
- \_\_\_\_\_ Certain as a sun
- \_\_\_\_\_ Song as old as rhyme
- \_\_\_\_\_ Rising in the east

### Appendix Three Hero (Mariah Carey)

There's a hero, if 1) \_\_\_\_\_ look inside 2) \_\_\_\_\_ heart  
You don't have to be afraid of what 3) \_\_\_\_\_ are  
There's an 4) \_\_\_\_\_, if you reach into 5) \_\_\_\_\_ soul  
And the sorrow that you 6) \_\_\_\_\_ will melt away

**\* Repeat**

And then a hero comes 7) \_\_\_\_\_  
With the strength to 8) \_\_\_\_\_ on  
And you cast 9) \_\_\_\_\_ fears aside  
And you know you can 10) \_\_\_\_\_  
So when 11) \_\_\_\_\_ feel like hope is gone  
Look inside 12) \_\_\_\_\_ and be strong  
And you'll finally 13) \_\_\_\_\_ the truth, that a hero lies in 14) \_\_\_\_\_

It's a 15) \_\_\_\_\_ road, when you face the 16) \_\_\_\_\_ alone  
No one reaches a 17) \_\_\_\_\_ for you to hold  
You 18) \_\_\_\_\_ find love, if 19) \_\_\_\_\_ reach within yourself  
And the emptiness you felt will 20) \_\_\_\_\_

**\* Repeat**

Lord knows, dreams are hard to 21) \_\_\_\_\_  
But don't let 22) \_\_\_\_\_ tear them away  
Hold on, there will be 23) \_\_\_\_\_, in time, 24) \_\_\_\_\_ will find the  
way

**\* Repeat**

## Appendix Four

### Yesterday Once More (Carpenters)

When **1(I/me)** was young, **2(I/me)**'d listen to the radio  
Waiting for **3(me/my)** favorite songs  
When they played, I'd sing along, it made **4(I/me)** smile

Those were such happy times, and not so long ago  
How I wonder where **5(they/them)** had gone  
But **6(they/them)** are back again  
Just like a long lost friend  
All the songs **7(I/me)** loved so well

#### \*Repeat

Every sha la la la every wo-o wo-o, still shines  
Every shing-a-ling-a-ling, that they're starting to sing, so fine

When they get to the part, where **8(his/he)** is breaking **9(she/her)** heart  
It can really make **10(I/me)** cry, just like before, it's yesterday once more

Looking back on how **11(it/they)** was in years gone by  
And the good time that **12(me/I)** had  
Makes today seem rather sad, so much has changed

**13(It/They)** was songs of love that I would sing to then  
And I'd memorize each word  
**14(That/Those)** old melodies, still sound so good to **15(I/me)**  
As **16(them/they)** melt the years away

#### \*Repeat

All **17(I/my)** best memories come back clearly to **18(I/me)**  
Some can even make **19(I/me)** cry  
Just like before, it's yesterday once more



**Appendix Five**  
**Change The World (Eric Clapton)**

**Fill in the blanks with the following words. Some words are repeated.**

(dream, down, made, queen, sunlight, think, inside, king, could, reach)

If I can **1)** \_\_\_\_\_ the stars  
Pull one **2)** \_\_\_\_\_ for you  
Shine it on the heart  
So you **3)** \_\_\_\_\_ see the truth  
Then this love I have **4)** \_\_\_\_\_  
Is everything it seems  
But for now I find  
It's only on my **5)** \_\_\_\_\_

**\*Repeat**

If I can change the world  
I'll be the **6)** \_\_\_\_\_ in your universe  
You would **7)** \_\_\_\_\_ my love was really something good  
Baby if I could change the world

If I could be **8)** \_\_\_\_\_  
Even for a day  
I'd take you as my **9)** \_\_\_\_\_  
I'd have it no other way  
And our love will rule  
In this kingdom we have **10)** \_\_\_\_\_  
Till then I'd be a fool  
Wishing for the day

**\*Repeat**

Baby if I could change the world  
If I could change the world  
I would be the **11)** \_\_\_\_\_ in your universe  
You would **12)** \_\_\_\_\_ my love was really something good  
Baby if I could change the world  
Baby if I could change the world  
Baby if I could change the world