

Using Pop Music to Enhance English Learning in Lower Secondary

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Pop music is an invaluable tool for learning a language, both inside and outside the classroom, and in this article, I will examine the benefits of using songs with lower secondary learners. An immediate example of this is *Hello Goodbye* by the Beatles, as it is ideal for exploiting antonyms. I have lower secondary learners identify the opposites used in the song and to recognise these while listening (and singing along!)

Meaningful, Motivating and Memorable

Songs are *meaningful*, *motivating* and *memorable*. These three Ms are essential in language teaching with lower secondary learners who need to be constantly stimulated and encouraged. Songs are *meaningful* to this age group as they can relate to them on a personal and emotional level. Because they are interested in (often obsessed by!) music, they find this kind of learning highly *motivating*. Songs are, of course, very *memorable* – we have all experienced how songs “stick” in the mind, and by giving lower secondary learners opportunities to notice the language structures and vocabulary used in contexts, songs become an extremely effective learning tool. Subsequent listenings to the song outside the classroom can subconsciously consolidate the language, reminding the listener of the language points, regardless of time and place. Lower secondary learners are also reminded that English is not confined to the classroom and that the language they are learning is real – all of the above reasons give them clear learning goals.

Songs create a positive learning environment

Where possible learners should be asked to sing the song, not only to help improve pronunciation, but also to lift their spirits. By singing as part of a group learners are less conscious of making errors, and are focused on the specific task, rather than the language used. Apart from the emotional pleasure gained from singing, the increased intake of oxygen cannot but put them in a good mood! Take these two ‘feel-good’ songs – *I’m A Believer* by The Monkees and *Lemon Tree* by Fool’s Garden. The accompanying activities (taken, from the Italian publication of *Team Up in English* (Kavanagh, Moore, Morris, 2011, ELI) are very simple, with students forming the past simple (in the former) and present continuous (in the latter) forms of a selection of verbs, and listening for them in the songs. By using upbeat songs, to which lower secondary learners can sing along, we can create an extremely positive atmosphere in our classrooms.





Involving 'left and right' brains

When we study language we are using the brain's left hemisphere, but music and repetition stimulate the right hemisphere - the use of songs involves both hemispheres in the learning process, thereby greatly increasing lower secondary learners' potential. When teaching the structure *used to* and question forms I use Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive* ("I used to cry, now I hold my head up high") and Elvis Presley's *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* The brain's left hemisphere is responsible for completing the activity, while the right hemisphere consolidates the language through music.

Improving structure, lexis and phonology

Songs help make the learning of new words and structures more natural and memorable. By singing along, lower secondary learners are naturally acquiring real vocabulary and clearer pronunciation. English, as a stress-timed language, is very rhythmical, and rhythm greatly aids memorisation, even for single words. Songs can also be used to highlight social issues and promote discussion for example, I use Jack Johnson's *The 3 R's*, a song about the importance of recycling, with accompanying activities from www.tuneintoenglish.com

Flexible, authentic and readily available

Not only can more than one activity type be used with any song, they can also be adapted to any level, and are 'real'. Murphey (1992) demonstrates how anything you can do with a text you can do with a song - the task should, of course, be graded to the learners' level. Songs are also very easy to source - if the teacher doesn't have a copy, the learners will almost certainly have one. This goes back to the three Ms, where the use of lower secondary learners' favourite songs, rather than the teacher's is far more meaningful, motivating and memorable (content of learners' choices will need to be vetted for age appropriacy prior to classroom use, of course).

I would like to end by encouraging you to experiment with *Blame It On The Boogie* by The Jacksons, where lower secondary learners can mime the sunshine, moonlight, good times and boogie, then listened to decide who to blame it on! I hope this article has had you singing and dancing along as you replay the well-known lyrics to the songs I have referred to in your head and now have more ideas for enlivening our lower secondary English classrooms using music!

References

Kavanagh F. www.tuneintoenglish.com

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Fergal Kavanagh has taught at Scuola Superiore, the British Council and the University "L'Orientale" in Naples. He has held teacher trainer sessions throughout Italy, as well as in Spain, France, Turkey, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Jordan and Ireland. Through his website www.tuneintoenglish.com he promotes the use of songs as his favourite teaching approach. He is also co-author of *Team Up in English*, published by ELI for *Scuola Superiore di Primo Grado* (new edition 2011).

