
Tune into English – using pop songs as a language learning tool

by Fergal Kavanagh

Introduction

The use of pop songs as a language learning tool is becoming increasingly popular, and is a method I have used in my English classes for over ten years. The students were so enthusiastic at first that I then regularly incorporated it into lessons. This success has led to the website I am currently working on, www.tuneintoenglish.com, which features downloadable worksheets and teacher's notes for exploiting songs.

The benefits to using songs are manifold, improving students' productive and receptive English, and encouraging them to recognize the language used in songs, thereby improving their overall grasp of the language. Tim Bowen and Jonathan Marks (1994) have written about the importance of tuning into features of the speaker's (in this case singer's) voice as well as the language and content. In his excellent book "Music & Song", Tim Murphey (1992) demonstrates that anything you can do with a text you can do with a song, and practically all comprehension techniques and strategies used for exploiting listening and reading can be applied to songs. In many cases, as I will outline below, songs have a distinct advantage over traditional texts.

Meaningful, Motivating, and Memorable

Songs are **Meaningful, Motivating, and Memorable**. Colin Granger, in his series of Teacher Training sessions (1992), pointed out that the three M's are essential in teaching. Students, especially at a school-going age, need to be constantly stimulated, and encouraged. When you use songs in the classroom you are using something which is **meaningful** to students. Most students spend many hours outside the classroom listening to, and discussing, their favourite artists. By bringing this material into the classroom they can relate to it on a personal and emotional level. Because they are interested in (some would say obsessed by!) this medium, they find this kind of learning extremely

motivating. R. Gardner (1991) refers to this as integrative motivation, where a learner has an interest in learning an L2 because of a 'sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other language group'. He found that there is a consistently positive correlation between integrative motivation and L2 achievement. Songs are, of course, extremely **memorable** – we have all experienced how songs “stick” in the mind, and by giving students cause to think about the language structures and vocabulary used, songs become an extremely effective learning tool. This last point is reinforced when they subsequently actively listen to, or passively hear, the song outside the classroom, subconsciously consolidating the language. In a 1994 article Bibi Boarder refers to the gentle brainwashing effect of subsequent hearings of songs used in the classroom, reminding the listener of relevant teaching points, regardless of time and place. In this way the language is not so much being learned as acquired. Students are also reminded that English is not confined to the classroom, and that the language they are learning is real – all of this gives them clear learning goals. One of Krashen's five hypotheses (1981) on language learning claims that learners perform best through acquisition, that is by using language for real communication.

Songs create a positive learning environment

It is extremely important that students enjoy the learning process, and the use of songs ensures a happy learning atmosphere. Bibi Boarder (1994) debated the importance of emotions when learning, contrasting the logic used in conventional lessons with the students' pleasure (or disappointment!) on recognition of a well-known song in a classroom situation. It is important, where possible, to ask students to sing the song, not only to help improve pronunciation, but also to lift their spirits. By singing as part of a group students are less conscious of making mistakes, and are focusing on a specific task, rather than the language used, the advantages of which have been discussed by Jane Willis (1996). Apart from the emotional pleasure gained from singing, the increased intake of oxygen cannot but put them in a good mood!

Involves “left and right” brains.

Music enters the subconscious quickly and subtly. The brain is a pattern-seeker, so putting information in an organised framework such as a song makes it easier to remember. We know the brain is divided into left and right hemispheres - when we study language we are using the left hemisphere, but music uses the right hemisphere. While language students usually use just the left hemisphere, the use of songs involves both hemispheres in the learning process, thereby greatly increasing students’ potential. Eric Jensen and Tony Buzan have written extensively about this.

The Brain

Left hemisphere

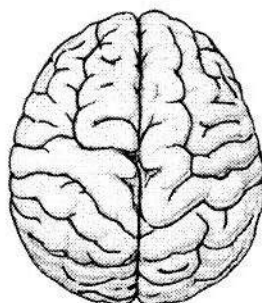
Right hemisphere

Controls **right** side of the body

Controls **left** side of the body

Analytic

Creative



Controls:

- bad moods
- speech
- **language**

Controls:

- good moods
- non-verbal skills
- recognising patterns
(e.g. puzzles, smiles 😊)
- **musical capacities**

Improves Grammar, Vocabulary and Pronunciation

Language teachers are often obsessed by grammar, and songs are an ideal vehicle for improving grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Songs help make the learning of new words and structures more natural and long lasting. By singing along, students are naturally acquiring real vocabulary and correct pronunciation. English, as a stress-timed language, is very rhythmic, and rhythm greatly aids memorisation, even for single words. One of the possible criticisms of the use of songs in the classroom is that the grammar used is often incorrect. This, however, reinforces the correct use of the language, as we are rather perversely more likely to remember mistakes in language use (e.g. “That you don’t get her preg” as opposed to “That you didn’t get her pregnant” in “Summer Nights” from *Grease*), and can also be exploited as a test of Grammar comprehension. Students’ awareness of rhyming words is also heightened in many cases.

Flexible, Authentic and Easily Available

Not only can more than one activity type be used with any song, but they can also be adapted to any level, and are “real”. The task should be graded to the students’ level – Jim Scrivener (1994) stresses that an important feature of task-based listening is the grading of the task rather than the recording. Songs are also very easy to find – if the teacher doesn’t have a copy, the students will almost certainly have one. This goes back to Colin Granger’s three M’s, where the use of students’ favourite songs, rather than the teacher’s, is far more meaningful, motivating (especially if students choose the song themselves), and memorable.

Conclusion

The use of songs in the classroom is an extremely important tool, especially for students at secondary level. By using them regularly, either as the basis of a lesson or as a “filler”, students are exposed to real English in a meaningful, motivating and memorable context, greatly facilitating the learning process.

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