

10.6 Using music to enhance language teaching

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Introduction

Pop music is an invaluable tool for learning a language, both inside and outside the classroom, and the session I gave at the conference examined the benefits of using this method, illustrated with practical examples.

I chose 'Hello Goodbye' by the Beatles as the opening song, as it is instantly familiar to most people, and is ideal for exploiting antonyms. Participants were asked to 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—students need to be constantly stimulated and encouraged. Songs are *meaningful* to students, and they can relate to them on a personal and emotional level. Because they are interested in (often obsessed by!) this medium, 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 students cause to think about the language structures and vocabulary used, songs become an extremely effective learning tool. Subsequent hearings of the song outside the classroom can subconsciously consolidate the language, reminding the listener of relevant teaching points, regardless of time and place. Students 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.

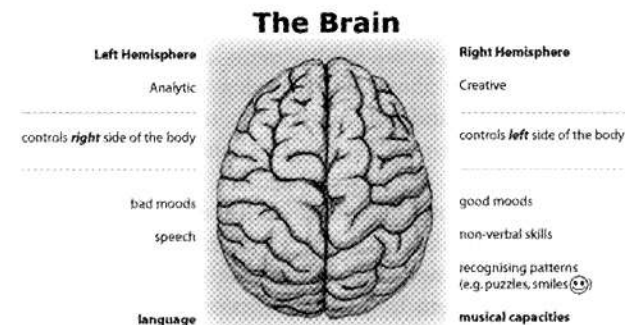
Songs create a positive learning environment

Where possible students 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 students are less conscious of making mistakes, and are focusing on a 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! I demonstrated this with two 'feel-good' songs—'Doo Wah Diddy Diddy' by Manfred Mann and 'Lemon Tree' by Fool's Garden. The accompanying activities—taken, like many of the songs in the session, from the Italian publication *Team Up in English* (Kavanagh, Moore and Morris 2008)—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 participants sang along, there was an extremely positive atmosphere in the room.

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 students' potential. I demonstrated this with vocabulary activities, using visual clues to complete the lyrics of the traditional

song 'There's A Hole In My Bucket' and Dean Martin's 'That's Amore'. The brain's left hemisphere was responsible for completing the activity, while the right hemisphere consolidated the language through music.



Improving grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation

Songs help make the learning of new words and structures more natural and memorable. 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. Songs can also be used to highlight social issues and promote discussion; I demonstrated this by playing Jack Johnson's 'The 3 R's', a song about the importance of recycling, taken from the website www.tuneintoenglish.com (Kavanagh 2008).

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'. Murphey (1992) demonstrated that anything you can do with a text you can do with a song—the task should, of course, be graded to the students' level. 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 the three Ms, where the use of students' favourite songs, rather than the teacher's, is far more meaningful, motivating and memorable.

To finish the session I chose 'Everybody Needs Somebody To Love' by the Blues Brothers, a universally recognised song, preceded by a simple phonetic matching activity. By singing along (and even dancing!) we closed the session with a smile on our faces and many ideas for enlivening our language classroom.

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References

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- Kavanagh, F., C. Moore and C. Morris. 2008. *Team Up in English* (Italian edition). Ancona, Italy: ELL.
- Murphey, T. 1992. *Music and Song*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.