

Using Music in the Adult ESL Classroom

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Music can be used in the adult ESL classroom to create a learning environment; to build listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing skills; to increase vocabulary; and to expand cultural knowledge. This digest looks briefly at research and offers strategies for using music in the adult ESL classroom.

Research

Neurologists have found that musical and language processing occur in the same area of the brain, and there appear to be parallels in how musical and linguistic syntax are processed (Maess & Koelsch, 2001). In one study, college students demonstrated improved short-term spatial reasoning ability after listening to Mozart. This was dubbed the “Mozart effect” in the popular press (Rauscher, Shaw, & Ky, 1993).

Using Songs in Instruction

Most classroom music activities focus on lyrics. Educator Tim Murphey conducted an analysis of the lyrics of a large corpus of pop songs and found that they have several features that help second language learners. They contain common, short words and many personal pronouns (94% of the songs had a first person, I, referent and are written at about a fifth-grade level); the language is conversational (imperatives and questions made up 25% of the sentences in the corpus); time and place are usually imprecise (except for some folk ballads); the lyrics are often sung at a slower rate than words are spoken with more pauses between utterances; and there is repetition of vocabulary and structures. These factors allow learners to understand and relate to the songs (Murphey, 1992). A further benefit of pop song lyrics is that their meanings are fluid, and, like poetry, allow for many different interpretations (Moi, 1994). Following are strategies to use with songs.

Listening and Oral Activities

Songs contextually introduce the features of supra-segmentals (how rhythm, stress, and intonation affect the pronunciation of English in context). Through songs, students discover the natural stretching and compacting of the stream of English speech. For example, the reduction of the auxiliary have to the sound /uv/ can be heard in the song by Toni Braxton “You’ve Been Wrong for So Long: (2000). Similarly, the change of word final *t* + word initial *y* to /ch/ can be heard in a line from the Tracy Chapman song, “All that You Have is Your Soul” (1989), where the singer says, “Don’t you eat of a bitter fruit.” Moriya (1988) points out the value of using songs for pronunciation practice with Asian learners because of the many phonemic differences between Asian languages and English. However, students from any language background can benefit from a choral or individual reading of the lyrics of the songs mentioned above, practicing the natural reductions that occur in spoken English.

Students may summarize orally the action or theme of a song or give oral presentations about a song or musician, playing musical selections for the class. To involve the whole class, students can fill out response sheets about each presentation, answering questions about the featured topic, something new they learned, and something they enjoyed.

Reading and Writing Activities

Students can fill in the blanks before, during, or after listening to a song, and then check to see whether their word choices made sense semantically, even if they did not pick the exact word used. This helps build the important skill of forming hypotheses based on context (predicting). This activity, called cloze, is usually created by deleting words at predetermined intervals, e.g., every 5th or 7th word. However, words can be deleted instead to practice a target grammar point, such as past tense verbs, prepositions, or compound nouns, or to identify key words (Griffie, 1990). For example, in the popular Enya song, “Only Time”(2001), the auxiliary “can” could be omitted. (“Who can say where the road goes, where the day flows, only time. And who can say if your love grows, as your heart chose, only time.”)

One popular activity is to cut the lyrics into lines and have students put them in the correct order as they listen to the song. This can be done individually or in small groups. It may be necessary to play the song several times. After the lines of the song have been put in order, the song can be played once more as students read or sing along. Alternatively, the class can be divided into teams with identical sets of strips and compete to see which group can put the strips in the correct order first.

For short songs, students can work in small groups to write the words of a song. The process of putting the lyrics together as a group involves making decisions about word order, verb tense, and parts of speech. It also builds the teamwork skills so important to the workplace and community. When the lyric sheet is handed out, the groups can compare what they heard and wrote with the actual words.

Adult students enjoy writing responses to songs, either in class or at home. Possible responses include topics comparing music in the students’ homeland with music in the U.S. This assignment draws upon the knowledge and experiences that adult ESL learners bring to language learning and provides a known context for comparing and contrasting, often a difficult skill for beginning writers.

Many songs tell a story, and these stories can be rewritten or retold to practice narrative or summarizing skills or direct and reported speech. Students can also complete writing prompt or answer a question from the point of view of the narrator or other characters in a song. For example, the Nancy Wilson song, “Guess Who I Saw Today,” (1960) is sung by a wife catching her husband having a romantic lunch with another woman. The prompt could require the students to respond to the accusations in writing, saying what the husband might say.

Vocabulary Building Activities

Pop songs are written to be easily understood and enjoyed. As discussed above, they tend to use high frequency lyrics that have emotional content. This makes them strong candidates for word study or for reinforcing words already learned through written means. If a series of songs is to be used, students can be paired and given a song to teach the class.

However, the songs may also have idioms in them that might be difficult to explain, depending on the level of the students. For example, Cat Stevens’ rendition of “Morning Has Broken” (1975) may appear initially to be a solid intermediate- level song that practices the present perfect tense. On closer examination, the expression “morning has broken” can be confusing to English language learners and may need to be discussed prior to listening to the song.

Cultural Knowledge Activities

Songs can be used in discussions of culture. They are a rich mine of information about human relations, ethics, customs, history, humor, and regional and cultural differences. A song can be part of a unit that

also contains poems, video footage, or still photographs. Recordings of freedom songs from the civil rights movement can be a powerful accompaniment to watching Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech on video, for example.

Selecting Music

Songs should be carefully selected for the adult ESL classroom. Lems (1996) and Poppleton (2001), make the following suggestions:

1. Song lyrics should be clear and loud, not submerged in the instrumental music.
2. The vocabulary load for the song should be appropriate to the proficiency level. For example, Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" (1971) -- with its vivid imagery and possibilities for multiple interpretations -- might be successful with an advanced level class. With other learners, however, its fast pace, obscure references, and lack of repetition could prove troublesome, as could the word inversion in lines such as, "There walks a lady we all know."
3. Songs should be pre-screened for potentially problematic content, such as explicit language, references to violent acts or sex, or inappropriate religious allusions.

Griffiee (1990) recommends using short, slow songs for beginning level students and discusses activities such as creating song word puzzles, drawing a song, or showing related pictures. With higher levels, he suggests using songs that tell stories, moving toward short, fast songs, and finally, longer, fast songs that have fewer high frequency vocabulary items.

Finding copies of song lyrics is not difficult. Many are available on the Internet, and many recordings contain lyric sheets. Beatles' songs such as "Yesterday" (1965) and "In My Life" (1966) have clear, direct lyrics and a timeless quality that make them appropriate with adult English language learners. Because teachers will show care and effort when presenting songs they are especially fond of, their favorites are also good. Finally, students are often strongly motivated to learn the lyrics of a new pop song or an old favorite they have heard and never understood, so their choices for classroom music should not be overlooked.

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