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Listen to the Music: Using Songs in Listening and Speaking Classes

Anyone who has taught a listening and speaking course to second language (L2) learners knows that it can be challenging. Besides the challenge of meeting learners' needs in general, teachers often find that some students are afraid to communicate for fear of making mistakes or may simply be uninterested in the topic. Fortunately, there are ways to successfully address such challenges, and music-based instruction is one of them.

This article promotes the strategic use of music in L2 classrooms to motivate learners as they practice and produce the target language and actively participate in the lessons. First, we briefly examine the decision to use music in the language-learning process from a psycholinguistic viewpoint. Second, we outline several benefits of music-based instruction, namely that it (1) reinforces the prosody (e.g., rhythm, stress, and intonation) of the target language, (2) authentically educates learners about the target culture and other cultures, and (3) encourages learners to express themselves. We also mention perceived drawbacks of music-based instruction. Third, we consider general learning strategies in listening and speaking classes and provide three sample music-based activities that we have successfully used in our own classrooms. Fourth, we offer an example of how music can motivate learners. Finally, we share a few takeaway points to keep in mind.

MUSIC FROM A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC VIEWPOINT

The field of psycholinguistics reports on a noticeable relationship between the spheres of music and language during brain development that can begin even before the age of two. The brain can understand and then organize the rhythm and syntax of music and language in similar ways (McMullen and Saffran 2004). Within the context of L2 learning, music stimulates thinking and helps improve skills such as verbal memory and auditory memory. In fact, "both music and spoken language involve the use of … complex sound and … enhance the encoding of linguistic information at the brainstem" (Wong et al. 2007, 420). To explore this idea, Wong and his team researched the question of whether music-related experience activates codes in the brainstem and therefore strengthens all auditory functions, such as L2 listening. The researchers measured how musicians and nonmusicians responded to different tones. They found that the musicians' brains could

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interpret and code linguistic pitch information better than nonmusicians' brains because the coding is connected to a greater familiarity with musical pitch. Therefore, "musical ability predicts the ability to produce and perceive the sound structures … of a second language" (Wong et al. 2007, 421). This finding suggests that more exposure to music both in and out of the classroom could have advantages for L2 learners as they process and produce the target language.

BENEFITS OF USING MUSIC IN THE CLASSROOM

An obvious advantage of music is that it is universal and loved by people of all ages and cultural backgrounds, so it is an excellent way to engage learners. For young L2 learners and adult L2 learners of all levels, music provides (1) the reinforcement of aspects of rhythm in a language, (2) an opportunity to examine culture and diversity through authentic songs and other materials, and (3) a way for learners to explore human vocal expression and communication, from speaking to singing.

When it comes to learning the rhythm of a language, using songs in the classroom can improve listening comprehension and provide pronunciation practice. Moreover, learners acquire vocabulary and idiomatic expressions through music and can even review grammar points they have studied (Arleo 2000).

Students benefit most when an appropriate song is selected for the lesson. Based on ideas from Simpson (2015) and Abbott (2002), the following list of questions will help guide the decision-making process for a teacher who is choosing a song:

1. Content: Does the theme of the song match up with your lesson?

2. Clarity of speech: Can your learners understand the lyrics?

3. Age: Repetitive songs may be better for young learners, while thought-provoking songs may be more suitable for older learners. What is the median age of your students?

4. Speed: Is the tempo, or speed, of the music what you want it to be?

5. Vocabulary: Is there specific vocabulary in the song that correlates with the lesson?

6. Grammar: Does the song highlight a grammar point that your lesson focuses on?

7. Idioms: How much idiomatic language does the song contain, and would you like to focus learning on the idioms in the song?

8. Popularity: Might your learners want to suggest songs they like?

9. Cultural sensitivity: Consider whether the song fits in with the cultural norms of your learners. Do the lyrics present an opportunity to explore topics of culture, diversity, and multiculturalism?

10. Offensive lyrics: Do you want to avoid using songs with explicit lyrics?

Regarding the ninth question in the checklist, an instructor can use music effectively to introduce aspects of culture and diversity. One great benefit of music is that it promotes multiculturalism among students in the classroom (Paquette and Rieg 2008). When language learning is introduced within a cultural framework, it becomes

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contextualized. Teaching songs to create contexts is beneficial because "songs in particular reflect and comment on key social, political and historical issues" (Arleo 2000, 11). Songs not only give access to cultural information, but they also bring diversity into the classroom by highlighting the musical tastes of various cultural groups. In English as a second language (ESL) settings, learners can access authentic music created by the diverse populations they encounter in everyday life, so they come to better recognize and understand those populations' identities. In English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, learners can use music to examine and challenge cultural stereotypes.

Honoring cultural diversity and developing a sense of acceptance in the classroom are necessary in language teaching. There are many modes of human vocal expression, and focusing on several of these modes in the curriculum gives learners the chance to understand different types of cultural expression. "Human vocal expression" can be viewed as a scale, "with casual speech (e.g., ordinary conversation) on one end and song on the other" (Arleo 2000, 10); heightened speech, which falls in the middle of the scale, refers to telling stories and jokes, reciting poems, chanting, and giving dramatic performances. For some cultures, these forms of heightened speech are appropriate and comfortable. For instance, chants have a rhythm and regular beat and can be used by learners at sports matches and other cultural events (Arleo 2000). Songs, of course, have a place in practically every culture. By recognizing learners as individuals with their own unique cultural backgrounds and experiences, instructors create an atmosphere of acceptance and diversity through the use of music and other types of human expression.

DRAWBACKS OF USING MUSIC IN THE CLASSROOM

While few drawbacks exist, one reason instructors resist using music in the classroom is that they believe they lack musical ability and training. However, "despite a teacher's level of musical training, the value of fostering creativity and enhancing literacy instruction through music is vital in today's diverse … classrooms. This is particularly true for English language learners" (Paquette and Rieg 2008, 227). The quality of the instructor's singing voice should not interfere with the students' efforts to learn and to meet the objectives of the lesson.

Instructors may also wonder whether music can be used with all students. According to Arleo (2000, 12), "music can be used profitably with virtually all language learners. However, the choice of types of music obviously depends on many factors, including the age, language level, cultural background and musical interests of the learner as well as the general learning context." Once again, it is important that the instructor choose appropriate, inoffensive music for the learners, based on the educational, cultural, and social contexts. Choosing suitable songs leads to students having successful and enjoyable learning experiences.

MUSIC AS A MOTIVATOR

As mentioned above, music is universally loved, and it provides pleasure and inspiration to listeners. Regarding the role of music as a motivator, Vethamani and Keong (2008, 95) write, "songs can be a form of useful resource in the language classroom for purposes of language development and to connect learners to issues that are of interest to young adults." According to Vethamani and Keong, previous

studies reveal that young adult ESL and EFL students respond positively to popular songs and participate more in class because the songs give them confidence to better express themselves both orally and in writing. In their study, Vethamani and Keong report on how L2 learners in Malaysia responded to popular rock songs by the American rock bands Linkin Park and Good Charlotte. Students listened to the songs, completed information-gap exercises with the lyrics, and participated in meaningful discussions about the content of the songs. The majority of students felt strong connections between the messages of the songs and experiences in their own lives—"searching for identity, loneliness, helplessness and hope"—and this motivated them to think and communicate these feelings with their classmates (Vethamani and Keong, 104). As the researchers observe, "the ability of students to connect song lyrics to their lives indicates interactive and reflective learning have taken place" (Vethamani and Keong, 105).

Music can also help to motivate adult learners who yearn for captivating teaching materials that will sustain their interest in language learning. Kao and Oxford (2014, 117) suggest that it is essential to choose appealing materials such as hip-hop music because a failure to do so may cause an adult student's desire to learn to "fade away quickly after any minor obstacle or environmental constraint (e.g., too busy to learn)." Adult learners lead busy lives, so intriguing music activities can serve to prolong a student's commitment to an English class.

MUSIC AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

Learning strategies are an important contemporary issue in English language learning. When using music to teach language, teachers should consider two broad strategic

areas in particular: (1) addressing global and selective listening skills and (2) examining fluency versus accuracy.

Global listening includes presenting new material through authentic sources with natural speech patterns. These speech patterns may include reduced forms, fast speech, hesitations and errors, and features of different dialects (Peterson 2001). Using music in the classroom connects to global listening because the songs themselves are authentic sources that contain varied speech patterns. Global listening can be supported by pre-, during-, and post-listening activities so that students grasp that the listening is situated within a certain context. Meanwhile, selective listening focuses attention on specific features of the language. Examples include unstressed endings, articles, inflections and tones, and function words such as prepositions or conjunctions. Teachers can use strategies such as predicting parts of songs and relying on learners' background knowledge to help students identify specific language features in the lyrics. By considering a song within global and selective listening frames, learners can more successfully engage with the song's meaning and content.

Another strategy is to highlight differences between fluency and accuracy that are present in songs. L2 learners may need assistance with specific fluency or accuracy issues that are appropriate for their level. Addressing fluency in listening may involve looking at reduced speech forms, and addressing accuracy may involve focusing on correct grammatical features (Peterson 2001). In response to such needs and teaching points, instructors may choose songs that focus more on either fluent language or accurate language (e.g., songs by The Beatles would be a good example if the focus is on grammatical accuracy).

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At this point, we would like to introduce and then elaborate on examples of fluency- and accuracy-focused activities involving songs. The Corner Game is an ideal warm-up activity to engage students from the start of a lesson and get them out of their seats. While a song is playing, students indicate how they feel about the music by walking to a designated corner in the classroom where they practice their listening, speaking, and critical-thinking skills through informal, small-group discussions. This activity, explained in detail below, is flexible in terms of the significance of the corners and the content of the songs, which the teacher can use to complement the topic of the current lesson. Aside from the fact that they get to listen to music, students enjoy this activity because it gives them the opportunity to share their own ideas and opinions and to learn more about their classmates.

Activity 1: The Corner Game
Strategic focus: Fluency

Time: 5–10 minutes

Materials: Songs (music player or laptop optional)

Directions:

1. Give each corner in the classroom a title: the "Always" corner, the "Sometimes" corner, the "Seldom" corner, and the "Never" corner.

2. Tell students that you are going to play part of a song (up to 30 seconds), and they should think about how often they listen to this type of music.

3. Play part of the song.

4. As the song plays, students stand up and move to the appropriate corner based on how often they listen to the type of music represented by the song— always, sometimes, seldom, or never. For example, if you play a rock song and a student always listens to rock music,

that student will go stand in the "Always" corner.

5. Stop the song. Have students look around and see where everyone is standing.

6. Hold small-group discussions for students in each corner to give them the opportunity to practice speaking English. You—or the students—might ask the following questions to generate discussion:

   • What type of music is this? How do you know?

   • When do you listen to songs like this? How does it make you feel?

   • Who are some artists you like or dislike who play this type of music?

7. Encourage some students to share their answers with the whole class. Ask follow-up questions such as the following for further speaking practice:

   • What specifically about this song or type of music makes you like or dislike it?

   • Is this music popular in your country/city/village/home? Why or why not?

   • What is a song that you would recommend to your friends?

Note: Step 4 can be adapted in many ways for the purposes of your lesson. For example, if you teach adjectives and emotions, you can give corners titles like "Happy," "Upset," "Energetic," "Calm," etc., and students in each corner can explain why the song makes them feel that way (e.g., "This song makes me happy because of the sound of the guitar").

Another popular fluency-focused option is Verse Scramble, an activity that can be conducted at any appropriate point in

the lesson. With Verse Scramble, students practice listening comprehension, reading comprehension, critical thinking, and speaking as they try to grasp the sequence and message of verses in a song. If students are at a lower proficiency level, lines can be used instead of whole verses. An advantage of this activity is that it can be done individually, in small groups, or as a whole class, depending on the class size. One reason students enjoy this activity is that when they predict the content and meaning of a song, there is not necessarily only one right answer. Student fears of being "wrong" are decreased, making it less intimidating for them to express their ideas.

Activity 2: Verse Scramble
Strategic focus: Fluency

Time: 10–15 minutes

Materials: Song lyrics on pieces of paper; songs (music player or laptop optional)

Directions:

1. Choose a song with several verses that is appropriate for the students' proficiency level and the content of the lesson. Write or type each verse on a separate piece of paper.

2. Divide the students into small groups (in a small class, students can do the activity individually).

3. Give the students the title of the song. Encourage small-group or whole-class discussion by asking students to predict what the song will be about. Making predictions gives students an opportunity for English speaking practice and helps them become interested in the activity.

4. Give the groups pieces of paper with the song verses (one verse per paper). If the students have lower proficiency levels (e.g., beginner or low-intermediate), you can give them one or two lines of the song instead of an entire verse. If

no paper copies are available, write the lyrics on the board. Make sure the verses or lines are mixed up in a random order.

5. Before playing the song, give students two or three minutes to read the lyrics and try to put the verses or lines in the correct order.

6. Play the song. Students should listen carefully to the lyrics and arrange the pieces of paper so that the verses or lines are in the correct order.

7. After the song ends, see if the students were able to order the verses or lines correctly.

8. Ask the students questions to encourage more speaking:

   • What type of song did we hear (rock, pop, etc.)?

   • Were your predictions about the song accurate? Why or why not?

   • What do you think the lyrics mean?

   • What are some important words in the song that help explain the meaning?

   • How is the message of the song related to your life?

Finally, an example of an accuracy-focused activity involving music is Madlibs. Like the previous activities, it is flexible and can be conducted at the beginning, middle, or end of a lesson. Also, teachers can choose songs according to the topic of the lesson as well as the students' proficiency level. With Madlibs, students integrate their listening comprehension, reading comprehension, grammar, critical thinking, and speaking skills. Going beyond a standard information-gap exercise, this activity allows students to test the grammatical limits of a song in a fun, creative way, and in the end they even have the opportunity to write their own songs.

Activity 3: Madlibs
Strategic focus: Accuracy

Time: 10–15 minutes

Materials: Song lyrics written on paper or the blackboard; songs (music player or laptop optional)

Directions:

1. Choose a song that is appropriate for the students' proficiency level and the content of the lesson. The song should be new or unfamiliar to the students.

2. Show students the lyrics from a verse (either pass out papers or write the lyrics on the board). Some of the words should be missing, and the part of speech of each missing word should be given under the blank. For example, here are the first few lines of the classic folk song "Home on the Range" presented this way:

   Oh give me a _____ where the
               (noun)
   buffalo roam

   where the deer and the antelope
   _____
     (verb)

   where seldom is heard a _____
                     (adjective)
   word

   and the skies _____ not
           (linking verb)
   cloudy all day.

3. Before you play the song, discuss the lyrics and vocabulary to create context for the students. This can be done in small groups or as a whole class. Questions you might ask include the following:

   - What do you think the song is about?

   - Which words seem most important?

   - What do you think the missing words are (from the given context)?

4. Before you play the song, have students fill in what they think the missing words are on their papers or on the board.

5. Play the song. Students will listen to see if they guessed the missing words.

6. When the song ends, ask students if they correctly guessed the missing words and engage them in a discussion about the vocabulary and the meaning of the song; you might ask these questions:

   - What words in the song did you already know?

   - What are new words you learned from the song? What do you think they mean (from the context)?

   - How does the singer feel in this song? How do you know?

   - What do you think the meaning of the song is?

   - Which words help us understand the meaning of the song?

7. Have students write their own version of the song by replacing the missing words with words of their choice. They can do this in small groups or as a whole class. Students can choose any word as long as it is the appropriate part of speech. This is a chance for students to be creative and have fun. When they are done, they can even sing their new songs!

CONCLUSION

Music appeals to practically everyone. Although keeping L2 learners engaged can be challenging, using music as a teaching tool is a way to bring the class together and inspire interest in the lesson. Using songs in the English classroom benefits learners in many areas, including linguistic development,

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exposure to culture and diversity, and experience with multiple ways of human expression and communication. Fortunately, the number and types of music-based activities are seemingly endless; the three included in this article are only the beginning. For example, you could give your students a title and have them create the first verse of their own song based on that title, or you could have them create a melody for their favorite English phrase or idiom. You could also do a timed class songwriting activity, where small groups of students write the first verse or line of a song, and then they pass their paper to the next group of students, who will write the second verse or line, continuing from the previous group's work. Of course, the class could perform the song together after it has been written.

We encourage those who have not used songs in the classroom before to pick an activity and a song, then give the activity a try. And we encourage teachers who have used songs in the classroom before to examine your own music-based activities and see how they can be adapted for different ages, proficiency levels, and course content.

Whether you are teaching certain grammar points, focusing on accuracy or fluency, or conducting speaking practice, and whether you are teaching beginning, intermediate, or advanced learners, there is likely a suitable song for your lesson. For instructors, music is a strategic choice that increases learner motivation and awareness in the classroom. For learners, music is a way to gain access to authentic materials from a specific cultural context. If music is used effectively, everyone wins.

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