

Lyric Videos: Sound, Image, and Meaning for English Language Learners

You've probably enjoyed lyric videos, and you may already use them in your classroom, but you may not know that they have their own genre and their own name. That's because the lyric video genre has evolved relatively recently, due to the increasing ease and affordability of combining music, images, and typography into videos.

A *lyric video* is a video that plays a song and shows images as the song's lyrics are displayed in an artistic format. The genre is a natural fit with what we know about best practices in second language acquisition (TESOL International Association 2018), as explained below. This article will provide an introduction to the lyric video genre and some of its variations, then share lesson plans

for using lyric videos in your classroom. I will use four popular lyric videos as exemplars, at four different age and skill levels.

The elements of a lyric video create a dynamic synthesis through artful combination. Each of its main elements has power in and of itself, but they are more effective in combination. We might make an



Introductory image for the lyric video of "Give Me Your CO₂," by Ricky Kej

analogy to poetry. A poem consists of not only words, but (usually) a written form and a spoken form. Each word choice has a relationship to the words around it, in its sound, its meaning, and often even its appearance on the page. As we experience the poem, all of these combine to create an aesthetic and emotional effect far greater than any one element.

ELEMENTS OF LYRIC VIDEOS

Let's look at the three elements of a lyric video—the song, visual images, and typography—and then bring them back together and see how English teachers can put them to productive use.

1. *The song.* The core of the lyric video is a recorded song. Songs can be used to develop pronunciation, phonological awareness, vocabulary growth, listening comprehension, intercultural awareness, comprehension strategies, and class community, to name only a few areas (Lems 2002, 2016, 2018; Lo and Li 1998; Page 1995). In fact, it would not be surprising if many readers of this article were propelled into the field of English teaching partly through listening to English language songs!

Songs can also comfort, nurture, inspire, affirm identities, and help people feel and handle their emotions. That may be in part because of the way humans are wired, says anthropologist Steven Mithen. He has gathered evidence across disciplines to support the thesis that rhythm and repetition found in song are unique and innate to humans (Mithen 2005). He speculates that this “musical acquisition device” (Levitin and Tirovolas 2009, 216) has helped our species survive.

Through new brain-imaging technology, we now know that listening to and playing music cascades through many

areas of the brain. Gottfried Schlaug of Harvard Medical School sums it up nicely: “I would challenge everybody to come up with another activity that engages as much real estate in the brain as music-making does” (Schlaug 2009, 26).

2. *Visual images.* Visual images, like music, provide a pathway to meaning beyond words. Teaching with visual images was used as a strategy in training manuals during World War II—the visual aids did not require learners to have advanced reading skills or even the ability to read in English (Witty 1944). Black-and-white photography, followed by color photos, brought visual images to a more prominent place in education, especially in art history and art courses. Eventually “moving pictures” entered the American classroom, and now many kinds of animation are an integral part of teaching.
3. *Typography.* Although not all lyric videos use creative typography, most do. Typesetters and art directors choose type fonts, size, color, orientation, and special features such as shading and shapes with care and skill. Kinetic typography, a newer form, moves print around the screen, moving through time and space as a video plays. Kinetic typography may include onomatopoeic words, such as “Pow!” and “Boom!” in a similar way to their appearance in comic books and graphic novels. Added to a song video, they can create a powerful dynamic, virtually leaping off the screen.

Putting It Together

The song, the visual images, and the kinetic typography overlap with one another, giving the learner access to an aesthetic product that is much greater than the sum of its parts. Put in more academic language, Pérez Ruffi (2018, 1) calls lyric videos “audiovisual discourse with textual codes and graphic design.”

GENESIS OF THE LYRIC VIDEO

Originally, lyric videos were an homage made by amateurs to a song, musical group, or artist. In this respect, lyric videos resemble “fan fiction,” another popular fan-generated genre (Contrera 2014). No longer just fans, writers of fan fiction are reviewed and rated, and the titles fly off the shelves. One example is the anthology by Tanjeem (2019), a collection of reviews of fan-fiction writers in the Harry Potter genre.

Fans of a writer or a series write alternative endings, extensions, prequels, or sequels (Hellekson and Busse 2006). Lyric videos, on the other hand, create a visual extension of an existing song but not a new song. Instead, the artistry comes from the creative visual enhancements of the song through images and kinetic typography.

How did lyric videos rise to the level of a new genre? O’Keeffe (2014) traces it to the creation, in 2014, of the Best Lyric Video category in the MTV Video Music Awards. Also, because we can see how many “views” and “likes” a music video gains, the lyric video has new power as an important measure of a song’s popularity. The lyric video is now part of the publicity generated by labels and artist management. According to O’Keeffe (2014), “Lyric videos give artists another bit of fuel to get their song to the top.” An online search with the term *lyric videos* reveals that they now make up a sizeable chunk of music-related videos.

Influences and Variations

Lyric videos are fed by—and in turn, feed—related artistic genres. *Music videos* have existed for decades and were used as a teaching tool for secondary students as early as 1985 (Willinsky 1985). They have a Grammy category of their own and have become as elaborate and expensive as film projects. Some have even effectively repurposed the original song as a soundtrack for a story that may not relate to the song or the artist(s). Although lyric videos are

considered a subset of music videos, music videos do not normally include written lyrics. *Karaoke*, another popular cousin to the lyric video, displays the lyrics of a song as the music plays, with the lead vocal omitted. However, there is normally not a visual display, and the lyrics are readable and not kinetic. As teachers of English know, karaoke is a popular and fun vehicle for practicing language in a friendly setting.

Kinetic typography is a developing genre and has an entire channel on Vimeo that includes many creative projects, including lyric videos (see <https://vimeo.com/channels/kinetictypography> for examples). Kinetic typography is found in songs, poems, theatrical pieces, and spoken prose. *Performance poetry* sometimes includes kinetic typography; however, performance poetry uses spoken words, not songs. *Rap* and *hip-hop* feature spoken words within a song. Sometimes the chorus is sung and the verses spoken, and the videos may combine live performances with prerecorded video inserts. However, these videos do not include written lyrics. *Digital storytelling* uses pictures or video clips to tell a story or define a word or concept. Digital stories are found in many schools now and are even created by young digital natives at the elementary level. Digital-storytelling products may contain many of the same elements as lyric videos, including songs, but usually do not include lyrics.

LYRIC VIDEOS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Best practices in teaching English as a new language are summarized in a best-selling book from the TESOL International Association (TESOL International Association 2018), which covers several decades of research. One of the early points in the book is that teachers “must depart from the predominantly language-based instruction and use a full repertoire of resources for meaning making” (TESOL International Association 2018, 10); lyric videos certainly introduce

an eclectic repertoire of resources. The authors also enumerate Essential Conditions for language learning, and at least two apply well. The first is “motivation,” a primary component. Teachers consistently note that using music in language classrooms is motivating and enjoyable for learners (Coyle and Gómez Gracia 2014; Guglielmino 1986; Kao and Oxford 2014; Lems 2002, 2016; Lin 2008; Medina 1990). Language learning is a long-term project, and, put simply, “activities that lead to language learning must be inherently pleasurable or the eventual goals so positive that they are worth the struggle” (TESOL International Association 2018, 21).

The second pertinent Essential Condition for successful language learning is to “facilitate emotional conditions” in order to create a “welcoming, safe, and relaxing environment” (TESOL International Association 2018, 21). Teachers in classrooms that use music often report that students feel relaxed and at ease when songs are part of classroom activities (Murphey 1990). Music seems to lower the *affective filter*, a metaphor used by Krashen (1982) to help us visualize the effect of stress on language learning. When a learner is self-conscious or feels judged or rushed, an attitudinal “filter” goes up that will impede or prevent learning. On the other hand, when songs are in use, the ambience is likely to be relaxing, and the affective filter will decrease, enabling learning.

Lyric videos have special advantages for teaching English language learners because there are auditory, visual, and typographical aspects, providing input that does not rely on words alone (Britsch 2009; Rasinski 1990). This three-level approach is especially valuable for students in a non-English-dominant environment who may not hear spoken English on a regular basis.

LESSONS

To guide the use of lyric videos in the English learning classroom, I have chosen four representative lyric videos to suggest

lessons that can be used at different levels. There is a range of proficiency levels and background knowledge within each of these levels, so each teacher will have to fine-tune the lesson as needed. When possible, these lyric videos should be combined with hands-on projects because English language learners can learn content doing projects while they are acquiring language (TESOL International Association 2018).

1. Early Childhood/Early Elementary Focus

“Let It Go” (Disney UK 2014) is from the Disney film *Frozen*. This lyric video, which Disney titles a “sing-along,” has logged over two billion views. It features a scene from the movie with lyrics running along the bottom of the screen under a bouncing snowflake. It gives young children who want to re-experience the movie a chance to see the scene again, hear the song, and sing along, from memory or by reading the printed words. Because many early-childhood learners are not reading in any language yet, the focus of this video should be experiential, not on literacy or vocabulary building per se. When older learners (or parents) watch the video, they may enjoy reading the lyrics, but the lyrics are at a complex vocabulary level, and understanding them is partly connected to being familiar with the plot of the movie.

Lesson Plan

- Activate prior knowledge: Before showing the video the first time, ask open-ended questions about snow, winter, how it feels to be cold, what people do in winter, etc. (Learners in some parts of the world will not be familiar with winter and can be asked to imagine what it is like to experience very cold weather. For example, children could “shiver,” and they could talk about what kinds of clothes and shoes are needed in the snow, as well as how snow affects plants and animals.)
- Warm-up: Ask if students have seen the movie *Frozen*. If students are likely to have seen it, you can summarize the main events of the movie. If they can summarize part



Title image for the lyric video of “Give Me Your CO₂,” by Ricky Kej

of the movie, that’s even better. If they haven’t seen it, introduce the song with a simple description of the character and the situation.

- Show the video and ask children to notice things they see in it. Ask open-ended questions about what they saw and heard: What things did you see? Where did Elsa go? What is she wearing? How do you think she feels?
- Ask the children to look at the words below the video while you play it a second time, finger-pointing to the words as you sing along. Encourage children to sing along with whatever part of it they can, or at least the words “let it go.” Play the song a third time, continuing to encourage sing-along.
- Do an art project of cutting and decorating paper snowflakes. Children can hold their decorated snowflakes and walk around the room, listening to the song and singing along if they can. Let them use their bodies, facial expressions, and words (if they are able) to show how they feel.

2. Elementary Focus

“Give Me Your CO₂” (Kej 2019) is a song on an environmental album project by Ricky Kej, a high-profile musical visionary in India. The song and lyric video are presented from

the point of view of a tree, asking people to give it their carbon dioxide so that the tree can transform it into oxygen. The song helps children understand the crucial value of trees.

Lesson Plan

- In advance of playing the video, post pictures of trees, with tree names in students’ native language(s) and English, around the room (if possible). Students could also draw a tree, paste pictures of trees on posters, or collect actual samples of leaves or nuts, which can be used for teaching. This can be connected to a larger unit on trees, plants, ecosystems, etc.
- Warm-up: Ask questions to activate students’ knowledge and interest: What kinds of trees grow where we live? How do we take care of them? Have you ever planted a tree? Have you ever watered or fertilized a tree? Have you ever trimmed a tree? Why are trees important?
- Review or introduce language concepts from the video, as needed. Below are suggestions; you can choose according to your students’ level and needs:
 - o Science concepts
 - photosynthesis
 - o Vocabulary
 - carbon dioxide and “CO₂”
 - oxygen (and “O₂” for comparison)

- with CO₂)
 - chain saw
 - o Idioms
 - leave [someone] be
 - o Informal versus formal English
 - gonna → going to
 - cos → because
 - o Syntax and structure
 - If _____, [then] _____ . (cause and effect)
- Play the lyric video on the screen as students watch and listen.
 - Ask students what they noticed as they listened and watched. Make sure to mention point of view. The song speaks of “I” and “you”; ask: Who is speaking? Who is talking in the song? Who is the speaker talking to?
 - Hand out a copy of the complete lyrics (or project them or write them on the board). Talk about any unknown words or phrases. Ask comprehension questions:
 - o Beginning proficiency: The tree says, “The rain isn’t falling, I need a drink.” What does the tree need?
 - o Intermediate proficiency: Use evidence from the text and, using your own words, tell why humans need trees. The song implies that trees also need humans. If this is true, in what ways do trees need us?
 - o Higher proficiency: Using science vocabulary, describe the natural process referred to in the chorus of the song.
 - Discussion questions (in a full group or small groups, depending on range of proficiency):
 - o Beginning proficiency: What kinds of trees grow where we live? Try to name five kinds. What can we do to help trees?
 - o Intermediate proficiency: Have you ever been in a forest? If so, describe the experience. If not, have you ever been in an interesting natural place? Tell about it. If not, what kind of environment would you like to visit?
 - o Higher proficiency: Besides planting trees and not cutting them down, how can people protect the environment? What can you do?
 - Play the video again, singing along on the whole song.
 - Follow-up: Beginning students can make a list of things people can do to help trees. Intermediate and high-proficiency students can work in groups to propose steps (or a project) they can take to protect trees where they live. If possible, have students take those steps and present about them in written or oral form.

3. Secondary Focus

“Where You Are” (Cali Swag District 2010) is called a “kinetic typography video.” The chorus is a sample of Michael Jackson singing his song “I Wanna Be Where You Are,” and the three verses of the song feature three different performers, each rapping on the theme of being far away from a loved one. The whirl of words across the screen and the appealing production make this lyric video irresistible.

Lesson Plan

- Warm-up: This song describes three men’s reactions to being away from someone they love and worrying about whether the person still cares about them. Ask the question: Have you ever been far away from someone you care about? Talk about it with a partner.
- Preteach vocabulary, as needed:
 - o Idioms
 - jump the broom
 - got the pastor waiting
 - have a ball

- o Informal versus formal English
 - gotta → got to [have to]
 - say [that] you [are] happy
 - me and you → you and I
 - where I'm at → what I think
 - o Explain that some of the lyrics in this song use dialect found in hip-hop and urban English. Dialects have rules, but they are not the same rules as standard or written English. It's important for students to understand that dialects do not need to be corrected, even though they differ from standard English. Dialects don't need to be imitated (although students can do this if they want), but it is good to learn to understand the words when they are spoken or sung.
 - o Explain that the structure of the song is a chorus with three verses sung by different rappers. Each rapper is responding to the same topic.
- Ask students if they know Michael Jackson's music and have them compare background knowledge. Teach the word *sample* (as a verb) and explain that Jackson is sampled in this song. Ask if they are familiar with the three rappers in the verses. Ask whether they know other songs in which an artist is sampled; compare notes.
 - Play the lyric video as students watch. Ask them to notice any typographic features that contribute to the meaning of the song (for example, the word *oh* in the chorus is depicted as a throat with an Adam's apple showing the vibrato). Ask students what they noticed while listening to the song or looking at the kinetic lyrics.
 - Hand out or show a copy of the complete lyrics and play the song a second time as students read along. Talk about any unknown words or phrases, and paraphrase as necessary.
 - Take a class poll, asking students to judge which verse they like best, second-best, and third-best. You could even set up criteria for the award together. Ask representatives of each choice to explain their answer. What differences did they notice in the lyrics and in the singing? What kinds of techniques are used by each of the rappers?
 - Allow students the opportunity to sing along on the chorus of the song as it is played again. In some class settings, you might include gestures or even dance steps. You know your class best!
 - As an option, invite students to create an additional verse of the song, then act it out in class. Could they create a verse that includes a "happy ending" (such as a reunion)? If students have the skills, they can create their own beat, or create their own video using kinetic typography. Formative assessment should focus on the process of creating the verse and avoid judging the product.

4. Post-Secondary/Adult Focus

"Look What You Made Me Do" (Swift 2017) is a lyric video using kinetic typography with several "official" versions surpassing a million views. This mysterious song of bitterness and revenge was performed and co-produced by musician Taylor Swift and issued on her own label. The eye-catching typography is almost like pop art, bold and brash. The lyrics are intriguing, and her vocal performance is evocative and catchy.

Lesson Plan

- Warm-up: Ask students to think of times in their lives in which they have been tricked or disappointed. How did that feel? How did they react?
- Preteach vocabulary, as needed:
 - o Idioms
 - nick of time
 - perfect crime
 - I got mine but you'll all get yours

- o Other vocabulary
 - tilted stage
 - karma
 - underlined
 - o Syntax patterns
 - make [someone] do [something] (create sentences in present and past tenses)
 - look [at] what _____
 - o Informal versus formal English
 - use of double negative in “don’t trust nobody” but not in “nobody trusts me”
 - ellipsis of subject pronoun in “[it] isn’t cool”
 - o Create sentence frames for students to practice speaking and writing sentences with these patterns and vocabulary.
- Ask students what they know about Taylor Swift and elicit background knowledge. (Many students may know this song.) Teach the term *lyric video*.
 - Give the song title and play the audio (only) of the song, asking students to tap their pencils to the beat. Teach the words *rhythm* and *beat*.
 - Turn on the screen and prepare to play the lyric video, explaining to students that they will be able to read the words as they listen to the song. Ask students to watch and listen for words you have previewed together. Ask them to note any typographic features that contribute to the meaning of the song (for example, the word *laugh* is in a mouth shape that smiles, and *lie* moves the mouth).
 - Next, hand out (or project) a cloze lyric of the song that you have prepared; ask students to write the missing words in the blanks as they listen to the song again. The cloze can be at random word intervals, or it may focus on the words you have pretaught, or some other focus. Make sure the blanks are far enough apart in the song and also on the paper that students have time and room to write the missing words as the song plays.
 - Go over the lyrics as a class and have students check their own papers. Talk about them together. Take note of words the students had difficulty catching and writing as they listened.
 - In small groups, have students talk about what they think has happened to the speaker in the song, and what she “did.” There are many references to a play and drama in the song. You might use these question prompts: How is memory similar to seeing a play? How is it different? The end of the song is in the form of an answering-machine message; what is the singer trying to tell people with that message?
 - Come back to the whole class and discuss. Then ask open-ended questions about the song: Is there anything in the song you can relate to your own experience? What do you like or not like about the song? Does it remind you of any other songs, and if so, why?
 - Ask students to write a story about something that happened to them, to someone they know, or to someone they heard about, or have them create an imaginary story describing an incident similar to the one in the song. If you want your students to practice using quotations and citations, ask them to include at least one quote from the song that connects to the story they wrote.
 - As another possible follow-up, as appropriate, you can find several karaoke versions of the song on YouTube. Could a karaoke performance of this song be part of a class party, perhaps?

TIPS AND REMINDERS

Although current URLs for the four lyric videos are listed in the References under Lyric Video Recordings, they may change. Web hosting can change overnight, and songs may disappear or reappear with little warning, so it's always a good idea to bookmark and double-check the site before each use. In addition, when playing the video in class, make sure to disable the comments view so that students do not inadvertently see antisocial and/or offensive words or epithets.

Teachers who do not have access to the Internet in class may need to plan for the lesson by finding a resource where they can access the Internet. Due to international copyright laws, songs cannot be freely downloaded; videos in general cannot be purchased for download either, so these lyric videos need to be played by finding them at their home location. Thus far, it is reassuring that major sites such as Disney, YouTube, and Vimeo are stable sources for millions of viewers to view videos without cost, and I hope that will continue to be the norm for a long time.

The lyric videos described in this article may not be appropriate for your context; however, the hope is that the lessons included here will give you ideas about how to make use of lyric videos you might choose for your class. It is important to choose a song that is close to the proficiency level of the learners. Too many unknown words, idioms, or concepts can frustrate students. At the same time, due to the motivational properties of music (Lems 2016), it can still be acceptable to choose a song when not all the words are familiar.

The important role of student choice cannot be overstated. When students can bring in or choose the songs they would like to study, it heightens their buy-in to the project. Students may have suggestions for artists, genres, and songs, and these allow teachers to find lyric videos they had no idea existed. It pays to be open to student suggestions!

CONCLUSION

The speed-of-light digital revolution is generating many new multimedia forms, and they will surely increase in the future. If you have not incorporated lyric videos into your teaching before, use this article as a starting point. Feel free to adapt the suggested lessons and look for other lyric videos that your students will enjoy and learn from. Enterprising teachers of English will find lyric videos to be an appealing genre to teach English, with optimal characteristics that leave both teachers and students with “a song in their hearts.”

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LYRIC VIDEO RECORDINGS

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