

# Helping Prospective EFL Teachers Learn How to Use Songs in Teaching Conversation Classes

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## Introduction

For the last two decades, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) methodology has been actively considering the possibility of using music and songs in class. The analyses of the recent EFL literature on the problem in question (Graham, Murphey, Saricoban, Eken, Jedynek, etc.) makes it possible to suggest that among the methodological purposes with which music, songs and chants are used in class, it is possible to rank the following:

- Practicing the **rhythm, stress and the intonation patterns** of the English language. (For this, see the excellent works by Carolyn Graham).
- Teaching **vocabulary**, especially in the vocabulary reinforcement stage.
- Teaching **grammar**. In this respect songs are especially favored by teachers while investigating the use of the tenses.
- Teaching **speaking**. For this purpose, songs and mainly their lyrics are employed as a stimulus for class discussions.
- Teaching **listening comprehension**.
- Developing **writing skills**. For this purpose a song can be used in a variety of ways--for example, speculating what could happen to the characters in the future, writing a letter to the main character, etc.

## Theoretical Background

Though the list of publications devoted to the topic in question continues to grow yearly, and though no one would doubt the potential of the songs and music as a springboard to students' creativity, I think there are still several aspects in which music is overlooked in the classroom. First, songs, especially chants, are very popular with teachers whose target audience are young learners, while adult learners are less often exposed to songs. Secondly, though a song is an inseparable unity of the music and its lyrics, it is the musical part that is constantly overlooked and ignored.

My own teaching shows that songs can be effectively used in an intermediate class for the purpose of teaching speaking to prospective EFL teachers. The main reasons for this are as follows:

- As a cultural phenomenon, songs can introduce students to the musical and cultural patterns typical for the target language community.
- Songs belong to a synthetic genre, which includes both lyrics, and music and these two constituents may be used as a good incentive for speaking English in class.
- Songs can effectively contribute to the students' development of esthetic appreciation since they may help them shape their artistic tastes in formulating a critical evaluation of the songs they listen to and discuss.
- Prospective teachers of English, in order to be able to use effectively songs in their own teaching in future, should themselves be exposed to them in the context of a teacher training program.

The question that any teacher who is willing to use music in class has to wrestle with is 'what kind of music and what particular songs should we choose from the "ocean" of today's music?' A quick glance at the musical picture of modern society shows how picturesque and colorful it is. When I use musical material in class for the first time, I always choose the songs I know and love myself. This enables me to be more emotionally persuasive as I expose my students to the songs and their interpretation of them. Later, while encouraging students to choose the songs for discussions, I ask them to follow the following criteria (though they are not free from being subjective):

- The song must be an example of a particular musical trend.
- There shouldn't be any form of violence in it.
- The song should contain a certain artistic image.

I have been incorporating songs into teaching EFL to prospective teachers of English for more than 10 years and I have to admit with a certain degree of surprise and content, that the songs by the "Beatles," though composed more than thirty years ago, generally appeal to the tastes of 19-25 year-olds since they deal with such eternal problems as love, commitment and parents/children relationships. One must also not forget to mention that the words are very intelligible and easy to distinguish. They are deservedly considered to be classics of pop music, from which different musical trends sprang up.

In my view, the main purpose of using songs in an advanced class should be for the development of the students' speaking skills and the promotion of their cultural competence. The model of speech development through songs was worked out with the tasks mentioned above in mind. This model should be comprised of three stages - preparatory, forming and developing - each of them having its own logistics.

## The Model of Speech Development through Songs

- Preparatory
  - Introductory talk: Micro-texts about different musical trends and history of the Beatles
  - Activities aimed at vocabulary development
- Forming
  - Listening and discussing songs; 7-step sequence:
    1. Pre-listening tasks.
    2. Listening to the song.
    3. Answers to the pre-listening tasks.
    4. Post-listening tasks.
    5. Presentation of the text of the song. (Optional)
    6. Second listening.
    7. Song discussion.
- Developing
  - Discussing different problematic issues and music genres
  - Tasks for using songs in English language teaching.

The aim of **the first stage** is to form lexical subskills of monological speech and to develop the speech content. For this purpose students are encouraged to read texts, containing information about different musical trends as well as musical reviews about various groups and singers, to fulfill pre-reading and post-reading tasks. As an example may serve the pre-reading and post reading activities that follow.

- Rank the musical trends you like most in the decreasing order. Compare your list with the one by your fellow student.
- Read the beginning of the essays on different musical trends and match them with the trend they refer to: Classical, Country, Electronica, Folk, Hip Hop/Rap, Pop, Rhythm and Blues.

For the full texts of the essays visit the Art and Culture magazine (Music section) at <http://www.artandculture.com>

It is at this stage that students do the activities aimed at vocabulary development, which also create the basis for song interpretation at the next forming stages. Below follow some examples of activities of this type.

- Match the words in Column A with their definitions in Column B.

a. Accompaniment	1. Simple tune, melody or song.
b. Song cycle	2. Vocal or instrumental part that compliments melody.
c. Motif/motive	3. A group of related songs unified by theme or lyric.
d. Ballad	4. Immediately memorable and appealing musical catch phrase.
e. Bridge	5. Individual song on an album;(vb) to record a song.

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| f. Air           | 6. A short melodic pattern or musical idea that runs throughout a piece.              |
| g. Oldie         | 7. Segment of pop song that connects verses and chorus.                               |
| h. Bubblegum     | 8. A song that tells a story; In popular music, usually a love song in a slow tempo.  |
| i. A cappella    | 9. Pop song from early ears.  |
| j. Solo          | 10. (Slang) light, trendy, innocuous pop music.                                       |
| k. Cut           | 11. Singing without instrumental backing.   |
| l. Hook          | 12. Single instrumental lead played over rhythm section usually in absence of vocals. |
| m. Lip-sync (vb) | 13. To mouth lyrics in sync with recording during performance.                        |

- Music is an extremely powerful art. It may evoke a strong emotional response. Listen to the song (choose any song you like) and determine the mood the song evokes as well as the feelings it arouses. Useful vocabulary: quiet, peaceful, active, buoyant, calm, restful, happy, dreamy, mysterious, self-pitying, intimate, sad, somber, festive, joyful, etc.)
- Music gives rise to our imagination and feelings. Bring to class several instrumental pieces of different genres of your preference. Play them and compare the associations caused by them among your fellow students. You may use the following phrases:
  - It reminds me of ...
  - It depicts the picture of ...
  - While listening I can easily imagine ...
- You may often hear somebody saying "I like the voice of this singer." Describe the voices of the singers you know, using the words given below.
  - Deep, gentle, soft, fresh, clear, lyrical, expressive, nasal, guttural, hollow, resonant, gruff, harsh, raucous, husky, mellow, metallic properly/not properly placed.
- It is possible to define the rhythm of a song in different words. Study the list of adjectives below and use them in the sentences of your own while speaking about the songs you prefer to listen to.
  - Assured, distinct, crisp, regular, irregular, dense, scattered, impatient, regular dance, abrupt, jaunty.
  - Models:
    - The song attracts me by its regular and assured rhythm.
    - I like the regular dance rhythm of this song, etc.
- Bring in class several songs you like and describe their vocal part with the help of the useful vocabulary given below.
  - Useful vocabulary: to sing lead; to be on lead; to do lead; to sing backup; to be on backup; to do backup; to do backup vocals; to sing harmony.
- Fill in the grid with the phrases that follow.

Manner of singing and playing	Stage presentation	Establishing rapport with the audience.

Introduce a fresh style of melody, of harmony, of rhythm; retain originality; have an outburst of new sounds; present an entertaining stage act; satisfy audience tastes; tend to be detached while singing; meet the tastes of the audience; put emphasis on vocal expression; shift emphasis from drums to bass; establish contact with the audience; be backed by drums; achieve variety of sounds; supply accompaniment; borrow old tunes; use familiar verses in new contexts; present an unusual interplay between vocal and guitar; echo one another; sing with high-pitched whoops.

**The second stage** is aimed at formation of speaking skills while interpreting and discussing the songs under consideration, with the 7-step sequence being used. (See the model above.)

As an example, let us consider the tasks fulfilled while working with the song "Yesterday."

Pre-listening questions: Who is on lead vocal and what instruments accompany him?

Post-listening questions:

- What mood do the melody and lyrics evoke?
- What is it about the song that makes it sound like it comes from another time?
- What instruments contribute to this effect?
- Can you describe the person speaking?
- What kind of love is depicted in the song?
- Is the love story told emotionally or with a tinge of detachment?
- How can you describe McCartney's manner of singing?

Listen to the song again. How would you describe the interaction between the singer's voice and instruments in the song?

- The song "Yesterday" is the most covered rock 'n' roll song of all time. More than 2.500 artists (Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles among them) covered it. Listen to the recorded version of the song "Yesterday" by Ray Charles. What differences in the manner of singing and in the song over all can you point out? Which singer is more dramatic?
- Choose a song you like most of all. Design your own activities for the 7-step sequence (see above). Bring the song in class and encourage your fellow students to interpret and discuss its lyrics, musical part and the artistic image created in the song.

The aim of **the third stage** of the presented model is to further develop speaking skills on the topic "Music" and to prepare students for using songs in the EFL classroom. At this stage students are involved in less teacher controlled activities, such as: discussions, simulations and role-plays. The examples of the questions for discussion as well as simulations might serve the following:

- Is it difficult to be an attentive and appreciative listener?
- What should a person need to know?
- Why do young people gravitate towards new rhythms?
- Should a teacher know and understand pop music in order to be able to discuss it with the pupils; helping them to differentiate between original and well-written music from second-rated ones of newly formed groups?

The task "Support or challenge the following statements" also serves the purpose of preparing students for discussion about the modern perspectives of development in music:

- Nowadays, young people prefer only that kind of music to which they can dance or just talk to friends. It should be simple, cheerful and up-to-date.
- The pop music rhythms may be new and vigorous, but they lack variety: it's the same monotonous beat again and again. The tunes are mostly primitive and as easily forgotten as picked up.
- Today's pop music is at a crossroads. New and interesting composers and soloists have appeared. Established styles have been replaced by new ones. Some groups are trying to achieve alloys of different styles.

The concluding lesson on the topic may go in the form of a panel talk where students present their points of view on trends in modern music, supporting their presentation by musical pieces related to the discussion.

Since the ability of using the songs and music in class is an important constituent of the would-be teachers preparation, the third phase should also include training, so that prospective teachers of English could have the knowledge and skill to do the following:

- Be able to select interesting texts on the topic music.
- Be able to analyze the didactic potential of a particular song.
- Know how to teach a song to the pupils.
- Critically evaluate songs with the purpose of including them in class activities.

To develop the skills mentioned above, it is possible to encourage the students to fulfill the following tasks:

- Study the song lyrics by your favorite group. Select those ones you believe would be effective for language teaching while discussing the topics "Friendship", "Parents and Children", "Love in Song lyrics and Poetry".
- Collect interesting stories about music and musicians. Explain why these texts may be effective tools for language instruction; work out pre-reading and post-reading activities.
- Select five pieces of music that belong to different musical genres; etc.

- Listen to the song and think of the questions you could ask your pupils to help them understand the song.
- Give a two-minute introductory talk on the importance of being a careful listener.

## Conclusion

Concluding, I would like to mention that the system of activities presented above has the character of a training model, which may be creatively extrapolated to different musical genres - be that jazz, classic music, country music or any other.

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