

Reasons for Using Songs in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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Introduction

Songs have been part of the human experience for as long as we can remember. As Gugliemino (1986) stated, adults sing at religious services, bars, in the shower, and listening to the car radio. Songs have become an integral part of our language experience, and if used in coordination with a language lesson they can be of great value. Fortunately, with the expanding prevalence of the Internet and specifically the World Wide Web into both the classrooms and lives of students, access to music and lyrics has been made easier. This paper will focus on the reasons for using songs by demonstrating their effectiveness as a learning tool.

Theoretical Rationale

A large amount of literature which discusses the value of using songs in ESL/EFL classrooms is not empirically based. However, based upon teacher experience, the first hand knowledge of what actually occurs in a language classroom is, in fact, very valuable. The first step in developing a theoretical rationale for using songs in the classroom is to label the types of listening processes and then identify the reasons teachers and researchers provide. From here, we can see that the teachers' motives are actually grounded in theory. Patterns emerge from the literature as to why teachers and researchers find using songs valuable. These patterns include affective reasons, cognitive reasons, and linguistic reasons.

There are two processes involved in listening, and both can be utilized when songs are used in the classroom. The activity which is selected for a particular song will determine which of these processes is active. Cullen (1999) states that

The first is bottom-up processing where the listener builds up the sounds into words, sentences and meaning. The second is top-down processing where the listener uses background knowledge to understand the meaning of a message. Practicing both of these processes is essential for developing listening comprehension.

The affective, cognitive, and linguistic reasons for using songs which follow, are all grounded in learning theory, and provide insights into the benefits of songs in the classroom.

Affective Reasons

The Affective Filter Hypothesis is one of five proposed hypotheses developed by Steven Krashen. Basically, it is an explanation of how the affective factors relate to language learning. It is particularly appealing to teachers because it provides an explanation to why some learners learn and others do not.

Teachers have long recognized the need for students to have a positive attitude in regard to learning. Krashen (1982) explains that for optimal learning to occur the affective filter must be weak. A weak affective filter means that a positive attitude towards learning is present. If the affective filter is strong the learner will not seek language input, and in turn, not be open for language acquisition. The practical application of the Affective Filter Hypothesis is that teachers must provide a positive atmosphere conducive to language learning. Songs are one method for achieving a weak affective filter and promoting language learning.

With the affective filter weak, Saricoban and Metin (2000) have found that songs can develop the four skill areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Eken (1996, p.46) states that songs can be used:

- To present a topic, a language point, lexis, etc.
- To practice a language point, lexis, etc.

- To focus on common learner errors in a more direct way
- To encourage extensive and intensive listening
- To stimulate discussion of attitudes and feelings
- To encourage creativity and use of imagination
- To provide a relaxed classroom atmosphere
- To bring variety and fun to learning

Lo and Li (1998) offer similar suggestions, writing that songs provide a break from classroom routine, and that learning English through songs develops a non-threatening classroom atmosphere in which the four language skills can be enhanced. The belief that songs provide enjoyment and develop language skills is also noted by several other authors (Adamowski, 1997; Bechtold, 1983; Domoney & Harris, 1993; Griffiee, 1992; Guglielmino, 1986; Lems, 1984; Little, 1983; Monreal, 1982). The enjoyment aspect of learning language through song is directly related to affective factors.

Cognitive Reasons

Songs also present opportunities for developing automaticity which is the main cognitive reason for using songs in the classroom. Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988, p.473) define automaticity as "a component of language fluency which involves both knowing what to say and producing language rapidly without pauses." Using songs can help automatize the language development process. Traditionally, it was believed that automatization would occur through repetitive exercises in a non-communicative environment. However, the major shift towards the communicative teaching methodology requires that automatization occur in a different manner. Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988, p.476) state that we must "place students in an environment in which it is appropriate to use target utterances in a genuinely communicative fashion." The nature of songs is fairly repetitive and consistent. For example, a song such as "Sailing" by Rod Stewart provides ample opportunities for students to focus on the present progressive tense. The repetitive style of the song lends itself to an activity in which students create their own present progressive sentences based upon their own interest. After listening to the song, students create their own lyrics following the same tune as the song. Lyrics such as: I am writing, I am writing, in my notebook with my friends, are common examples of the type of language that students produce.

Linguistic Reasons

Besides automatization, there is also a linguistic reason for using songs in the classroom. Some songs are excellent examples of colloquial English, that is, the language of informal conversation. A song such as "My Best Was Never Good Enough" by Bruce Springsteen is a prime example of a song that demonstrates colloquial language use. This song is full of phrases like "Every cloud has a silver lining." and "Every dog has his day." Of course, the majority of language most ESL students will encounter is in fact informal. Using songs can prepare students for the genuine language they will be faced with.

Finally, two studies, Domoney and Harris (1993) and Little (1983) investigated the prevalence of pop music in the lives of EFL students. Both studies found that music is often the major source of English outside of the classroom. The exposure to authentic English is an important factor in promoting language learning. It relates directly to both the affective filter and automaticity. If students are exposed to songs which they enjoy, more learning is likely to occur since they may seek out the music outside of the classroom. The repetitive style of songs then helps to promote automatization of colloquial language.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, the three theoretical reasons are all intertwined and help to demonstrate the value of using songs in the classroom. The next step in the procedure is to successfully integrate the songs into a language lesson. Because of the Internet, access to music, lyrics, and activities has been simplified which makes it easy for the teacher to effectively use songs in the classroom.

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