



English Language Learning through Music and Song Lyrics—The Performance of a Lifetime

Diane Boothe¹, Jeff West²

¹Boise State University, ²Singer and Songwriter
(United States)

dianeboothe@boisestate.edu

1. Introduction

The number of English language speakers and the demand for English Language Learning (ELL) is growing at an exponential rate. Ongoing learning that is student centered and engaging promotes success and gives students a competitive edge as they develop and retain ELL skills and content. Music lyrics and songs not only provide tools to strengthen and reinforce vocabulary, comprehension, listening, speaking and writing, but increase learning and grammatical variations with auditory skills and rhythmic patterns that stimulate brain activity and encourage imagination.

Learning with music and song is supported by integrating complex interactive roles creating a positive environment with high levels of student achievement. Action research supports a connection between language and song, as well as actively engaging learners in stimulating activities and discovery. This publication outlines strategies for using songs, song parody and lyrics to introduce and strengthen ELL in the context of musical patterns, melodies, rhymes and creative vocabulary. Once students engage in ELL through music lyrics, the next step is to customize learning by composing their own lyrics and, for the capable and creative, set their lyrics to original self-composed melodies.

Innovative aspects and insights of this strategy for ELL are discussed in a flexible, collaborative method that supports this pedagogy delivery system. Cultural enrichment as well as an increased command of the English language is an asset accompanying seamless language learning in this transformational model that compliments traditional English acquisition methods. Information communications technology (ICT) can be incorporated to enhance and strengthen learning while sparking inspiration and creativity. Highlighting this publication are original song lyrics and melodies that will be demonstrated featuring singer, musician and song writer, Jeff West.

2. Incorporation of Song in the Classroom

There are multiple reasons for the contemporary language educator to incorporate music in ELL learning whether in a traditional classroom setting or in technology assisted language learning of the digital age. Music strengthens the culture of ELL for 21st century learners and provides a stimulating learning platform that encourages them to excel and provides a change from traditional classroom routines. Numerous learning opportunities and widespread benefits exist for ELL learners, and incorporation of music has the ability to tie key components of language acquisition together resulting in outcomes covering a range of the learning activity spectrum. Music helps students to develop the skills that are needed for ELL in a creative and innovative way, motivating them and positively impacting learning.

By adding variety and creative thought to the learning experience, the capacity for language development is expanded and the brain is stimulated with unique and enhanced learning. Technologically savvy students have the capacity to combine musical activities and merge them from the desk top to the digital world as interest and learning evolve. Music lyrics abound in the digital age and are easily accessible along with software and a variety of on line musical supporting activities.

3. Lowering the Affective Filter

Music and song are “instrumental” in lowering the influence of affective filters that interfere with language learning. Krashen [1] suggests that optimal learning is impacted by emotional non-linguistic variables such as fear, anxiety or boredom. These affective filters serve as a screen to block comprehensible input by preventing information about the second language from reaching the language areas of the mind. The



incorporation of music leads to a positive attitude about learning and supports expanded and creative opportunities. By minimizing the affective filter and providing a relaxing atmosphere, stress is eliminated and motivation can increase [2]. Along with this environment, language acquisition is also achieved, often without concrete lesson objectives, but through self-directed learning that leads to exponential growth.

Songs are suggested as an excellent method for promoting language learning. Saricoban and Metin [3] have found that songs can develop the four skill areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Learning is further increased when students have the opportunity to write their own songs and lyrics in an atmosphere that is comfortable, relaxed and conducive to language learning. This activity can be followed by discussion of students' original work and an opportunity to share in small groups or online. The belief that songs provide enjoyment and develop language skills is also noted by several other authors [4]. This aspect of learning language through song is directly related to decreasing affective factors and increasing those aspects resulting in improved language learning performance.

4. Lyrics to Reinforce Cognitive Learning

Recognizing that language learning requires complex cognitive skills, song lyrics encourage and increase cognitive learning by integrating multiple dimensions that will engage students of varying abilities. Students retain more knowledge when reinforced through song and the integration of lyrics and language. By blending education and entertainment, approaches to learning are evolve and reinforced. Music infused throughout learning creates authentic interactions that are connected, flexible and often collaborative. Additionally, enjoyment and entertainment are realized as students incorporate music and song into language learning.

The four major language acquisition skills that are targeted include grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and listening, however learning a language to a high degree requires communicative competence as well [5]. The relationship of theory to the constructs of language acquisition requires challenging and interesting tasks that will pique the interest of the learner and lead to retention of knowledge. Much has been written regarding ELL pedagogy and strategies for cognitive learning, but whatever best practices are employed, they need to be based on realistic expectations and hold the interest of the students. For example, idioms or idiomatic expressions, which are words or phrases that have a hidden and figurative meaning conventionally understood by native speakers, can be taught through song and humor. Karaoke can be used effectively with students and the subtitles reinforce the language learning. Singing feels much less threatening to many who are learning a new language. Catchy tunes that resonate with students of all ages are beneficial in promoting lasting learning. For years, people have tuned in to music on the radio featuring popular current songs that shape cultures and world views. Simultaneously, they are strengthening and reinforcing language skills through extensive and intensive listening.

5. Sparking an Interest with Popular Bands

People of all ages relate to popular music. This genre of music is of particular interest to young people across the globe who are enthusiastic about top music artists and bands. Domoney and Harris [6] and Little [7] investigated the prevalence of pop music in the lives of EFL students. These studies found that music is frequently the major source of ELL external to the classroom. Many groups have come and gone, but the best pop rock groups have realized continuing success and perform to packed arenas worldwide exciting their fans with hit after hit. Many of these songs are written in English yet often performed to audiences in countries where the native language is one other than English. Other legendary bands hail from a variety of English speaking countries and lend unique regional phrases to their lyrics and musical style. For example, U2 and their lead singer, Bono, are from Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland. The Rolling Stones are an English rock band formed in London in 1962. Metallica has become a household name and one of the biggest selling bands in American history. AC/DC is an Australian hard rock band, formed in November 1973 by brothers Malcolm and Angus Young [8]. The more that young people listen to these lyrics, the better their English vocabulary becomes. At times, they may not completely understand the lyrics, but comprehension improves over time as they sing and discuss the music with classmates, family and friends. These extra-curricular activities increase time devoted to English and are excellent learning tools for contributing to the advancement of knowledge.



6. Song Parody to Add Humor

Integrating humorous music and song in ELL strengthens comprehension, grammar, pronunciation and phonological awareness. It provides the laughter that often leads to lowering the affective filter accompanied by a boost to learning. An excellent example of this is song parody. Song parody that focuses on altering the lyrics of the composer often for humorous purposes is a strategy for ELL. It involves changing or copying existing (often well known) musical ideas or lyrics, or copying the peculiar style of a composer or artist. Weird Al Yankovich is the most contemporary artist still doing this, but the real "king" was Allan Sherman [9]

Song parody is appropriate for a variety of contexts and ages. The learning objective is to use humor, satire and metaphorical semantics to develop learner skills. Songs are useful for "freeing the speech muscles" and evoking positive emotion [10]. Integrating creative language will build a pathway from vocabulary and grammar to expanded learning.

For the purpose of this lesson example, singer/songwriter, Jeff West, provides music and lyrics. Teacher selected songs supported by audio visual materials will also enhance the lesson. Before the class, select portions of two or three humorous songs that are age and learner appropriate. Write the lyrics for the students using a PowerPoint presentation, overhead projector or paper/board depending on resources available. As class begins, play music in the background to set the tone. The instructor will introduce the concept of humor and song lyrics and play a cut of selected songs for students discussing the humorous meaning of the lyrics. The visual posting of the lyrics will reinforce the vocabulary and humorous connotations. Share the concept of song parody with students and explain about people writing alternate words to already clever lyrics and tunes. Often young people will come up with alternate lyrics to favorite or traditional tunes. Two examples of song parody are:

From "Pop Goes the Weasel"

All around the mulberry bush
The monkey chased the weasel
That's the way the money goes
Pop goes the weasel

Alternate lyrics from "Pop Hates the Beatles" - Allan Sherman [11]

Sherman/Busch, 1964:
My daughter needs a new phonograph
She wore out all the needles
Besides I broke the old one in half
I hate the Beatles!

After discussing these lyrics and their meanings and rhyming structure, students will have an opportunity to begin writing their own lyrics to the song melody of their choice or an original melody. Then students can share lines in small groups. The more outgoing or musical students may even want to sing their lines, post them for the others to read, or perform them on a musical instrument. The lesson can be expanded to encourage students to write and illustrate the lyrics. As a special feature, a musician can visit the class and perform for students.



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Follow up: This lesson can continue over several days with students receiving class time to further develop their lyrics and share them with other students. Students can also be assigned groups to design a project involving several students. What follows is an original song with alternate lyrics.

"The Money Tree" - by Jeff West [12]
Jeff West Music BMI, cpy. 2003
Lord knows that I could use some
Can't we all?
Seems like I'm always robbin' Peter
to pay Paul, Dad gum it all.....

Alternate lyrics:
It's not like it's enough
That she's so tall
But she's also got a nose
like Charles de Gaulle, and that's not all...

An interesting caveat is that the noses of politicians and government leaders are often the source of caricatures and comedy. United States Presidents i.e. Bush and Nixon were known by reference to their noses and President Obama's ears are exaggerated in caricatures. Often older and younger students find humor relating to facial characteristics in songs. Artistic students can add artwork to enhance their songs or perform them on musical instruments. Depending on age and level of language competency, song lyrics can become more involved or complex. Group discussion will build the comprehension and creativity and elicit laughter and conversation.

7. Conclusion

Using songs and humor in the classroom has both linguistic and cognitive value for strengthening English language acquisition. It helps to develop cross-cultural and interactive communication skills. Song lyrics will stimulate phonetics, vocabulary and improve grammar. Students are motivated and the affective filter is lowered through song-based activities combined with humorous lyrics. Listening skills become more intense and focused. During the digital age, an extraordinary collection of music can be downloaded at little or no cost and numerous websites from around the world are available for educators and students. Creativity and imagination are stimulated in a positive class atmosphere where music is incorporated to enable optimum learning.

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