Teaching with the help of songs by Paul Ashe



Introduction

Listening to songs in class is a popular way to motivate learners. Many teachers use the lyrics to produce a gap-fill activity in which students listen to music and complete the gaps with the words they hear. Teachers may decide to eliminate lexical items or grammatical structures in order to focus the activity on a particular area. Gap-fills are one of many ways to exploit the grammar and vocabulary in a song's lyrics. I will look at some of these and suggest songs to use. I shall also touch upon other ways music can be used in class, including projects, pronunciation and classroom management. I've also included a short list of songs and what they might be used for at the end of the article.

Grammar and vocabulary

Depending on the song, the activities listed below can be adapted to focus on a wide range of language points. Very often, one song may be suitable to highlight more than one structure or lexical area.

- <u>Gap-fill</u>: Create gaps for the verbs in the song and tell students which verb form to use. Students then listen and check. *You found me,* by The Fray, is good for irregular verbs and Alanis Morrisette's *Hand in my pocket* can be used for adjectives.
- <u>Prompts</u>: Ask students to create complete sentences from the prompt words you give them in pairs. The complete sentences will be the song lyrics. They then listen to check their answers. *Sunny*, by Bobby Hebb, is good for prepositional phrases, for example:

Sunny / yesterday / life / filled / rain = Sunny, yesterday my life was <u>filled with</u> rain Sunny / you / smiled / me / eased / the pain = Sunny, you <u>smiled at</u> me and really eased the pain

• <u>Multiple choice</u>: Give multiple choice options for the target grammar. For instance, the use of the infinitives after modal verbs in the song *Don't stop the music,* by Rihanna:

Baby, I must <u>saying / say / to say</u> your aura is incredible If you don't have to <u>go /going</u>, don't

• <u>Sentence halves</u>: Students match the two halves of a sentence correctly and listen to check their answers. *Won't go home without you,* by Maroon 5, is useful to practise connectors:

I asked her to stay —	I had the chance to say
She left before	but she wouldn't listen

Questions and answers: Give the students questions and ask them to provide the full answer. The answer
is a line from the lyrics of the song. Students listen and check. For example, the use of the present and past
simple in Jon Bon Jovi's *Thank you for loving me*:

Q: What do you do when I fall down?	A: You pick me up when I fall down	(pick me up)
Q: What did you do when I couldn't breathe?	A:	(part my lips

 <u>Transformations</u>: To encourage language expansion and provide fun practice for exams like the Cambridge PET or FCE, give students a synonymous sentence in the song and ask them to transform the sentence using a specific word. The answer should produce the lyrics of the song. Students then listen to check their answers. This is ideal for practising structures, such as the changes (of tense, time and person) from reported to direct speech. You might use *Born to make you happy*, by Britney Spears:

She said she wished I had	been there that night	1
only		
If	_tonight.	
		1

• <u>Error correction</u>: To highlight a particular grammatical form, you could give students lyrics with certain grammatical forms that have been changed. Students correct the lyrics as they listen. In Gloria Gaynor's *I will survive*, students might have to correct the following chorus line to highlight the future simple: I will <u>surviving</u>



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- <u>Matching</u>: Underline lexical items in the text and give their definitions on the same worksheet. Students should listen to the song and try to work out the meanings of the underlined expressions from the context and match them with their definition. Madonna's *Hung up* is good for phrasal verbs such as:
 - to be hung up on someone
 - keep on doing something
 - wait on someone
- <u>Modals</u>: Give students the lyrics and listen to the song. Then discuss what the song is about, using modals of deduction in the present or the past. Using Avril Lavigne's *Skater boy*, you can deduce that the Skater Boy might have been an ex-boyfriend and he may have fallen in love with a friend of the singer and so on.
- Extension: Use the song as a springboard to introduce more relevant vocabulary. For example, *Paint it, black,* by The Rolling Stones, is a good means of introducing idioms of colour such as: 'to have green fingers' or 'to paint the town red'. The psychologist Reuven Feuerstein believes that any classroom activity should also help learners in the skills required to learn that language. A good point in question is the organization of phrasal verbs. For example, as mentioned above, Madonna's *Hung up* is a good way to introduce phrasal verbs. You could use this song as an opportunity to demonstrate different ways to organize phrasal verbs in students' vocabulary notebooks, e.g. as a spider diagram around the verb (or around the particle) or divided into lexical areas such as relationships.

For more suggestions of how to use songs for a grammatical focus see: http://www.onestopenglish.com/section.asp?docid=155160

Projects

- <u>Background</u>: Bob Dylan's *Hurricane*, about the case of a black boxer in a racist America, lends itself to a history project. Following a look at some vital langauge in the song, students could work out what happened to Rubin Carter (aka *The Hurricane*) and how Bob Dylan felt about the incident. This could lead to research and discussion on equal rights and the civil rights movement, police brutality or racism. If possible, you could also show the film version starring Denzel Washington, adapting the film script in the same way as the song lyrics to look at salient language points. U2's *Peace on Earth* about the bombings in Omagh, Ireland, in 1998 is also another example of looking at the target language culture through songs.
- Reading and discussion: Eminem's Stan is a good song to use as a gap-reading activity. In groups of four, students read one of the four letters the song is divided into and tell each other what their letter is about in order to put them into the correct order. They then listen to check their answers and discuss the problems that arise from the song, such as idolization of pop stars and the importance of role models. Students could go on to give a presentation about their own role models to the rest of the class, or even to write a letter to their role model in English.
- <u>Biography</u>: You could ask students to research the life of their favourite singer and write their biography, but without copying and pasting from Wikipedia! Students could make a collage as a visual aid in their presentation to the rest of the class and even u se these collages as evocative classroom decoration. This might also encorage students to take a Trinity College exam in which, from Grade 4 onwards, students must present a topic of their choice with an object (such as a collage) to illustrate it.
- Role plays: There are plenty of songs about relationships which provide great situations to expand upon. Cat
 Stevens' Father and son (or the Boyzone remake) offers a great scene of a father giving his son advice and
 the son not listening. Students could expand on the lyrics to create and role-play a dialogue between a
 father and son/daughter. Alternatively, you could write your own dialogue incorporating the lyrics of the song.
 Elicit from students what the dialogue is about. Then ask students to listen and underline the lyrics of the song
 embedded in the dialogue before acting it out.
- <u>Eurovision ring tone</u>: Explain what the Eurovision Song Contest is to students, then set groups the challenge of producing their own song. They could write lyrics to accompany a ring tone from a mobile phone. Once they have all performed, the class could vote for the best song.





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Pronunciation

• <u>Minimal Pairs</u>: Focusing on individual sounds (phonemes) that your learners find difficult, ask them to identify the word they hear from the two options of minimal pairs. This example is from John Lennon's *Imagine*:

Imagine there's no hidden / heaven (/I/ versus /e/)

It's easy if you try / tree (/aɪ/ versus /i:/)

- <u>Past simple regular verbs</u>: Give students the lyrics with all the regular past verbs underlined. Students listen and decide whether the *-ed* endings are pronounced /t/, /d/ or /ɪd/. Bob Dylan's *A simple twist of fate* is good for this type of activity.
- Connected speech: This covers a wide area that you can introduce your students to, inlcuding:
 - Elision (when a sound in a word disappears) such as the following example found in *Rehab*, by Amy Winehouse: 'You won't know, know, know'.
 - Weak forms (certain sounds are less stressed in some words) such as the schwas used in *Where is the love* by The Black eyed Peas: 'I think the whole world's addicted te the drama'.
 - Linking (when final consonants join with the vowel of the following word) such as in *Help*, by The Beatles: 'Now I fin dI've changed my min dan dopene dup the doors'.
 - Assimilation (when a sound is influenced by the sounds before or after it) such as in Chumbawamba's *Tubthumping*, which is an excellent song to practise many of the pronunciation areas mentioned above, as well as sentence stress. Assimilation is illustrated by the following chorus sentence: 'I get knocked down bu<u>d</u> I ge<u>d</u> up again'.

Classroom management

Music has been shown to create a harmonious atmosphere and improve learning in class. If this is so then classroom management becomes less of an issue.

- <u>Setting the mood</u>: Playing background music as students enter the classroom will create the mood for the lesson. Mozart is said to be beneficial. See www.mozarteffect.com for details of research findings.
- Routines: For young learners, you could use coursebook songs for classroom routines. As students enter the room, they sing an up-tempo song. When you want them to find a page in their books you could play different music (the same for lining up to leave, etc.). If your voice is up to it, you could even sing your own little jingles for these routines.
- <u>Pace</u>: Music can be used as an energizer to add some excitement for, say, a running dictation (The Prodigy's Funky shit is good for this – be careful which students you tell the title to) or to calm things down after an energizing activity (most ambient music is good for this), for example *Break of dawn* by Amethystium.
- <u>Fast finishers</u>: For those students who finish an activity quickly, you could have a song in the CD player with a simple activity based on an area previously studied. Students listen and complete the worksheet until the remaining students have finished. It is advisable to use headphones to avoid disturbing the other students.
- Saving your voice: Instead of shouting over a noisy group to get their attention, why not play a distinctive song or part of a song. The opening cock crow at the beginning of *Good morning, good morning,* by The Beatles, is good for this. How many times in your teaching career have you said, 'do this activity together' or 'come on you have one minute left'? Well, why not use musical excerpts do the work for you and your students might even listen first time! You could use the *Mission Impossible* music to give your students a one-minute countdown before they have to finish an activity. If you want to get students into pairs, try using the chorus from The Beatles song *All together now*, which repeats the song title, or the chorus from the song by The Farm, also called *All together now*. And if you want students to stand up to do an activity, you could play the chorus of Bob Marley's song *Get up, stand up*.



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Before you create an activity around a song, you might want to think about the following:

- · What English songs are popular with your students?
- Are there any songs in well-known adverts you could use?
- · Are there any unsuitable words or expressions in the song?
- · What useful language or pronunciation point does the song illustrate?
- What are the copyright laws about using music in class in your country? In the USA and Ireland, songs
 can be used for educational purposes. Have a look at the following website to find the copyright laws for
 your country: http://www.wipo.int/clea/en/.

There's no quick fix to adapting a song to the needs and tastes of your students. Creating a worksheet from song lyrics will often mean spending additional time preparing. However, if it helps your students improve their English and you can re-use the worksheet with other students of the same level, then the initial hard work quickly pays off.

What's more, you needn't (or perhaps shouldn't) restrict yourself to only focusing on one area. You can use a song to focus on a grammar or lexical point, then for pronunciation practice before following up with a project on it. This way, your students will really connect with the song (if they don't get bored first) and will remember your class every time they hear the song. So, why not have a go and make a song activity a lasting memory instead of a five-minute gap-fill filler?

References

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Songs and their possible uses

	_			I
Artist	Song	Structures	Vocabulary	Pronunciation
Bruce Springsteen	Trouble in paradise		household chores	elision
The Dubliners	The town I loved so well	past perfect and past simple		
Michael Jackson	Earth song	What about?	the environment	
Alanis Morisette	Hand in my pocket		adjectives	
Amy Winehouse	Rehab		drug addiction	elision
Avril Lavigne	Skater boy	modals	relationships	
Blur	Charmless man		suffixes with -less	
Bob Dylan	Simple twist of fate	past simple		past simple regular verb endings
	Hurricane		crime / racism	
Bobby Hebb	Sunny	prepositional phrases		
Bon Jovi	Thank you for loving me	past simple		
Britney Spears	Born to make you happy	reported speech		
Carly Simon	You're so vain		character adjectives	
Cat Stevens	Father and son	reported speech / giving advice	family relationships	
Chumbawamba	Tubthumping			assimilation
Eric Clapton	Tears in Heaven	second conditional		
Gloria Gaynor	I will survive	future simple	relationships	
Joe Cocker	You are so beautiful	verb <i>to be</i> in present		
John Lennon	Working class hero	by + gerund	class	
Lenny Kravitz	Fly away	wish + past simple		
Madonna	Hung up		phrasal verbs	



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Artist	Song	Structures	Vocabulary	Pronunciation
Maroon 5	Won't go home without you		connectors	
Moffatts	I'll be there for you	will for promises		
Percy Sledge	When a man loves a woman		expressions with <i>love</i>	
Pink Floyd	We don't need no education		education	sentence stress
Queen	We are the champions	present perfect simple		
Rihanna	Don't stop the music	infinitives after certain verbs		
Suzanne Vega	Tom's diner	prepositions		
The Animals	We gotta get out of this place			assimilation
The Beatles	Yesterday	Look as if / though – verbs of sense		
	All my loving	Future with will		
	With a little help from my friends	second conditional		
	Help!			linking
	Money		money	
	Across the universe		verbs of movement	
	She's leaving home		family relationships	
The Black Eyed Peas	Where is the love?			weak forms
The Clash	Should I stay or should I go?	should and modal verbs		
The Fray	You found me	irregular verbs		
The Kinks	Dedicated follower of fashion		clothes	linking
The Rolling Stones	Everybody needs somebody to love	indefinite pronouns		



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Artist	Song	Structures	Vocabulary	Pronunciation
The Rolling Stones	Paint it, black		idioms of colour / depression	
The Spice Girls	Wannabe			assimilation and weak forms
U2	I still haven't found what I'm looking for	present perfect simple		
Van Morrison	Brown-eyed girl		compound adjectives	
Will Smith	The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air	past simple		past simple regular verb endings