

Teaching with the help of songs

by Paul Ashe

- **Matching:** 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
- **Modals:** 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

- **Background:** 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 language 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.
- **Biography:** 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 use these collages as evocative classroom decoration. This might also encourage 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.
- **Eurovision ring tone:** 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

- **Minimal Pairs:** 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 (/ɪ/ versus /e/)

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

- **Past simple regular verbs:** 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, including:
 - 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 thə whole world's addicted tə thə drama'.
 - Linking (when final consonants join with the vowel of the following word) such as in *Help*, by The Beatles: 'Now I fin dl'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 bud I ged 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.

- **Setting the mood:** 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.
- **Pace:** 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.
- **Fast finishers:** 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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²Idea taken from Ashe, P. *Gadgets Galore*. English Teaching Professional. Issue 50.

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- www.trinitycollege.co.uk
- www.mozarteffect.com

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METHODOLOGY

Songs and their possible uses

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

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

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