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New Ideas for Teaching English Using Songs and Music

Music is universally pleasurable and important, and no known society is without it. In fact, it predates *Homo sapiens*! Flutes have been found around the campfire in Neanderthal cave sites in artifacts that date back 53,000 years (Leutwyler 2001). Music is part of our lives in ways both big and small, from musical rites of passage to the "wraparound" musical landscape we can now program into our earbuds. Young adults in particular listen to music almost nonstop, and their playlists form an important part of their identities. It only makes sense to use students' interest in music as a motivator for their English studies.

Even if you do not lead a choir or sing songs with students around a campfire, there are many ways you can bring music and songs into your English classroom. Some techniques can be enhanced by technology, but for many others, technology is not necessary at all. If you are not already convinced of the wonders of music and learning, the following brief overview may motivate you to try new techniques. In this article, I share effective ideas for using music to teach English, followed by a selection of reliable online resources for accessing music and songs.

MUSIC AND THE BRAIN

More than 100 years ago, French scientist Pierre Paul Broca (1824–1880) identified a part of the left frontal hemisphere of the brain as the area in which the syntax of language is processed. A century later, using magnetoencephalography (MEG) imaging, researchers found that music syntax was processed in that same area, named Broca's area (Maess et al. 2001). Fascinatingly, researchers found that Broca's area responded in a similar way to dissonant music and ungrammatical sentences. This finding suggested a close relationship between the "pattern making" activity found in both music and language. This was the first of many discoveries made possible in the field of brain research using equipment available at the time.

More recently, researchers have found that emotional reactions to music are registered in the limbic system, one of the oldest areas of the brain from an evolutionary standpoint (Moreno 2008). A researcher at Cornell University discovered that "music with a quick tempo in a major key … brought about all the physical changes associated with happiness in listeners" (Leutwyler 2001, 2).

Thanks to safe imaging technologies, including positron emission tomography (PET) scans, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), and MEG scans, we now have a more detailed look at music and the brain, and it is an amazing vista. We can see clearly that

musical experiences cascade across many areas of the brain, not only one or two. Laboratory Director Gottfried Schlaug from the Harvard Medical School has said, "I would challenge everybody to come up with another activity that engages as much real estate in the brain as music-making does" (Cole 2011, 29). And this is not only the case with music making; there are also benefits to music listening.

MUSIC AND LEARNING

Music and song nurture language growth. For infants, music and language are so intermingled that "an awareness of music is critical to a baby's language development and even helps to cement the bond between infant and mother" (Deutsch 2010, 37). Research at the Infant Learning Lab at the University of Wisconsin suggests that "infants learn more quickly from sung speech than from spoken speech" (McGowan 2008). Also, we know that the exaggerated vocal inflections known as "motherese," a musical, singsong way of speaking used by mothers in all cultures, assist children's transition into understanding language. As Diana Deutsch explains, "the boundary between speech and song can be very fragile" (Deutsch 2010, 37).

The Dana Foundation, a privately funded not-for-profit dedicated to supporting arts education and brain research, published an anthology of articles in 2008 summarizing research on the connections between the arts and learning. One chapter's authors (Posner et al. 2008) combined their results into a framework that might explain the relationship between the arts and intelligence. Put simply, the process begins with curiosity, which is piqued by experiencing an art form; this curiosity creates motivation and interest and leads to heightened attention, and when we are in that alert state of heightened attention, new learning occurs (Posner et al. 2008). Because music is motivating, it allows the mind to "train attention" and sets these learning processes in motion.

For teachers, this means that creating heightened attention in our classes by using music can create an atmosphere more conducive to learning—and who doesn't want that?

MUSIC AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Music offers special benefits for those learning a new language. As you probably know from your own study of English or other languages, listening to songs and singing is a natural and enjoyable way to practice new sounds, words, and phrases. In fact, learning a song or musical instrument is analogous in many ways to learning a language. We are required to produce and employ a repertoire of specific sounds, learn new patterns and rules, and master the "syntax" of songs and compositions. As musicians become more proficient, they—like language learners—make ever-closer approximations of the target sounds until they reach a level of ease and enjoyment, or "fluency."

Some forms of music, such as pop songs, work especially well for teaching English language learners (ELLs). Tim Murphey, in his classic book, explored why pop songs seem so effective in teaching English to ELLs (Murphey 1990). He found that pop songs have the magic combination of high-frequency words, repeated often, and the use of first and second person. As a result, listeners feel personally and emotionally involved with the songs (Murphey 1990).

Music training and participation foster growth in nonacademic areas as well. Two studies in the United States have shown positive effects of music participation on students. In the first study, with at-risk adolescents (Ho et al. 2011), two experimental groups of students drummed together in a counselor-led setting, while two control groups received standard instruction. In the drumming sessions, students called out positive messages they had created, in rhythmic phrases to the beat. The effects of the drumming, along with calling out the positive messages, resulted in a dramatic reduction in behavior-related problems for those in the experimental groups, after only 12 weeks (Ho et al. 2011).

In the second study, researchers at the Auditory Neuroscience Laboratory at Northwestern University in Illinois made another important discovery. After comparing two groups of low-income high school students—one that had

musical training and one that had fitness-based training—the researchers found that students who had group music lessons achieved significant improvements in "speech encoding," or extracting speech from noise (Tierney et al. 2013, 1). We might think of extracting speech from noise as just a hearing skill, but it is actually a decisive feature in overall academic success. Why? One reason is that classrooms are noisy places, and students who cannot make out the words spoken in the classroom will not learn. Research confirms that "higher levels of background noise are linked to worse performance on standardized tests" (Tierney et al. 2013, 5).

Older adults have difficulties hearing speech in noise, in parties and noisy restaurants, and the same Northwestern University laboratory found that musically trained older adults do better at this task. Hearing speech in noise is especially important for those learning a new language. Researchers Mayo, Florentine, and Buus (1997) found that pulling out speech from noise in a new language is easier for early bilinguals and harder for late bilinguals because "listeners who learn a second language after early childhood are likely to have difficulty discriminating some phonemes of their second language, especially when the auditory system is taxed by noise" (692). In the case of English, it can be especially hard for listeners to figure out ambiguous-sounding words because there are so many words that sound the same except for a slightly different vowel sound, such as *said* and *sad*, and *big* and *beg*.

We know that context-reduced messages in an L2, such as those in unfamiliar communicative situations, are especially hard to decipher (Cummins 1981). It is no wonder that one of the main language-learning methods of the last half of the 20th century, the audio-lingual method, used a language laboratory with headphones that blocked out all sounds except the target language. Unfortunately, the real world is not like that—we must use language in all kinds of noisy and distracting settings, so our ability to hear speech in noise is a key skill.

For these reasons, we can see that music is an important resource for those learning or acquiring a language.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH MUSIC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Although few of us have the resources to provide our students with music lessons, we certainly can bring musical appreciation and musical experiences into our English classrooms, with all the benefits they provide. An unquestionable benefit of the digital revolution is our greater access to music, not only music from our own culture but also music from around the world. We can see performances on YouTube, even if the performers are no longer with us. We can find lyrics to songs, so we are not left wondering what the words are. We can post and share our own musical creations through our smartphones and even perform them live through Facebook! And we can easily learn about and enjoy new artists and new music, from inside and outside our own cultures. It's a music lover's paradise—and most of us are music lovers.

What follows are three simple lesson ideas for using music to teach English. Each one involves listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Although the techniques can be enhanced by digital technology, none of them depends on it. I will share one basic activity for each of the three lesson ideas, along with a few ways to extend or vary the activity. At the end of the article, you will find a short list of websites that can help you generate lessons that incorporate music for use in your English classroom. Enjoy the tour!

LESSON IDEA 1: CREATING AND SHARING PLAYLISTS

Students already create playlists of their favorite mp3 tracks in their phones and play them while they do their daily activities. Like many of us, they have different playlists for different activities—one for studying, another for relaxing after a long day, and another for doing a workout. Our students already do this routinely. However, perhaps you never realized you could use their playlists in your classroom.

Activity: Soundtrack of My Life (Lapo 2016)

This lesson plan was created by Nedim Lapo, a preservice secondary English teacher candidate in my English as a second language (ESL) Methods

class. Lapo himself is an ELL and says, "Music is what helped build my language base and can do the same for other ELL/ESL students" (Lapo 2016, 1). In Lapo's lesson, students create a playlist of six songs representing different times of their lives. From this playlist, they choose one of the songs, transcribe the lyrics, annotate and analyze them, print a copy, and share it with the class. In addition to the one focal song, the student shares all the songs on the playlist and talks about why he or she chose them. Also, as students prepare to present the song and playlist to the class, they design a CD jacket and write liner notes about their choices. This is displayed as the songs on the playlist are played, on speakers, for the class.

This activity combines the five domains of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and communicative competence (Lems, Miller, and Soro 2017) while tying content to a student's own life. Lapo mentions that the songs do not have to be in English: "Students may choose songs in their native language and choose to translate their meaning and present those to the class" (Lapo 2016, 1). Making and sharing a playlist allows students to know and be known more deeply by the others in the class, and this shared knowledge helps create community.

Variations

- Allow a "mixtape" or "mash-up" of the students' favorite tunes rather than requiring them to compile complete songs. Since there are so many composite musical products created with sampling these days, this approach may fit with the interests of your students even better than including full songs. However, even if you adopt this variation, make sure that the students include some written lyrics.

- Another variation is to lead off with your own soundtrack—if it is not too personal. Students love to know about their teacher's musical passions, education, family background, and more. For many of us, such a soundtrack might involve our educational adventures. Do you have a special song that reminds you of your college days? Share it with your students.

- Many students are now able to create their own music videos or soundtracks using images; if your class has that technical savvy, and many do, consider this possibility.

LESSON IDEA 2: USING KARAOKE

Students enjoy karaoke during their social time outside class—so why not bring it into the classroom? There are thousands of English-language karaoke tracks on YouTube, and they can be played in class through any networked device, as long as external speakers are available and lyrics can be projected onto a screen or smartboard.

Activity: Beatles Karaoke (Dalton and Lewes 2015)

The Beatles are one of the most enduring musical groups, and it is not only because the songs of the "Fab Four" appeal to so many. It is also due to several striking features of the group's music:

1. The catalog of Beatles songs is large and has musical genres and arrangements in many styles, using instruments from sitar to string quartet to raunchy guitar.

2. Beatles songs have unusually audible lyrics, clearly pronounced and performed by four different singers, singing alone or in harmony.

3. The songs have simple, catchy lyrics and usually have a repeating chorus, giving more opportunities for practice and mastery.

4. Many of the songs deal with universal themes about loneliness, love, nostalgia, daily problems, or hopes for peace.

5. Finally, let's not forget that Beatles songs are "toe tappers" and "earworms"—they tend to get stuck in our heads for a long time!

An online survey of more than 500 ESL teachers found that Beatles songs were used by an astounding 40 percent of classroom teachers (Martin 2013). Dalton and Lewes (2015) created a lesson using Beatles songs in karaoke

format for beginning-level ESL students. The lesson gives students an opportunity to perform songs, in groups or alone, for others in the class, building confidence in producing the sounds and words of English. Dalton and Lewes note that this activity also helps with recognition of high-frequency words as well as lowering of the affective filter. Songs provide natural repetition that does not feel like a drill but can serve the same reinforcement function.

There is an abundant collection of Beatles songs in karaoke format on YouTube, many of them created outside English-dominant countries.

Choosing the song(s)

You may decide on a song that coincides with your thematic unit, a reading, or a grammatical structure. However, don't be afraid to stray outside your target grammar points. Music is a great natural introduction to new grammar forms, in many ways resembling our effortless first-language acquisition. When I was learning French, I had trouble with the word order of direct and indirect objects—which one came first? It was only when I learned the lyrics to the classic French love song "La Vie en Rose," as sung by Edith Piaf, that I could finally apply a template for it: *il me l'a dit*—"he told me." From then on, I was able to plug in the correct form when I wanted to make other French sentences with both an indirect (first) and a direct (second) object! Your students may experience similar breakthroughs with English.

After deciding on the song(s)

When you have settled on your song(s) and have found possible karaoke links, you still need to do these things:

1. Bookmark the site. Fan music sites have a way of disappearing or migrating to new URLs. I had this unpleasant experience when a site went dark the day after I had checked it, and my day's lesson was unusable. Once you have chosen your site, check periodically to see that the site is still there.

2. Test out the prospective karaoke by actually reading and singing the song in its entirety. Is it pitched in a singable range for your own class? Are the lyrics clear and readable? (Many karaoke sites use bizarre color combinations or fonts, making the lyrics hard to read.) Does the lyric highlighting match the music track? And are the entrance cues and breaks clear? Students can become embarrassed if they start singing too early or miss their cue. If even one of these conditions cannot be met, keep looking for a better karaoke track.

3. Avoid downloading the file. As tempting as downloading may be, do not do it; that violates copyright. In addition, downloadable music and videos are a prime vehicle for malware. Beware of "free music" offers.

4. Once you have a good karaoke song, type a copy of the lyrics. Let students take the lyrics home and practice or perform them outside class. Having a good, clean copy of lyrics is important.

5. When students are going to learn a new song through karaoke, make sure you play the "non-karaoke" version of the song to be sure they can follow the melody. This is not an issue for pop hits because students hear them dozens if not hundreds of times, but if you are trying out a song they do not know, obviously they cannot sing the karaoke until they know the tune. Sing the song several times as a group before anyone is invited to sing solo.

Variations

- Split the class into smaller groups to perform different parts of the song. For example, Group A might sing the first verse, Group B might sing the second verse, and so on, with all coming together for the chorus. If you use that format, you will need printed song sheets because some students may not have a good view of the karaoke lyrics, or they may want to plan their part before the words come up on the video. You could have the groups use accompanying hand gestures, hand clapping, or other rhythmic movement—the performance does not have to consist of lyrics only.

- Consider using an echo track. Some music videos keep the singer's voice in the track but have a place for others to sing along on a chorus. These videos can provide helpful and enjoyable musical experiences for ELL students, especially at a lower proficiency level. *Sing about Martin*, a catchy music video about Martin Luther King Jr., is an example of this (Weissman 2005). The simple words are clearly displayed and repeated, and each line is performed by a lead singer, echoed by a chorus.

- Ask students to find their own karaokes. Let your students take the lead. You might give a few cautionary words about which songs are appropriate for the classroom, but what is appropriate varies from context to context. Set your own rules for your own situation and try to affirm your students' interests when possible.

LESSON IDEA 3: REPORTING ON A CHOSEN MUSICIAN

In this student-centered project, learners practice the academic skills needed for research and give a presentation to their classmates based on a topic of high interest. Students practice their oral skills as well as their organizational skills. Because the Internet has rich artifacts of live musical performances, students can find clips of their favorite performers in concert, in the studio, or in interviews. The project also gives class members a chance to learn about and become fans of musicians and groups they have never heard of.

Activity: Portrait of a Musician

Students choose a musician they want to learn more about and feature in a presentation to the class. Often, a student has already sought out information about the chosen musician from several sources, and it is easy for the student to compile resources about that musician in order to create a class presentation. The project builds on the academic skills of synthesizing material from several sources, comparing and contrasting, and drawing conclusions. The aspect of student choice—and the fact that the general topic is music—reduces anxiety.

Once students choose the musician they want to focus on, give them enough time to compile the needed resources outside class. If you are devoting class time to the project, you may prefer going to a library or computer lab. Use whatever technology is available in your setting. This takes time.

Although the choice of artist is theirs, you should set parameters. For example, you might specify that they should find two biographies, two music reviews, and three live performance videos by the musician. You can decide on the number of sources depending on the time available and students' language proficiency level.

Also, you should prepare a rubric for the presentation so that students know exactly what you are looking for. For example, I specify a time limit of 10–15 minutes, of which no more than five can be spent watching a music video together. I learned the importance of this the hard way when one of my students just cued up a 15-minute performance of his chosen artist and sat down to enjoy it with us! You can also lower the total minutes if students are less proficient or if you have a large class. You should decide on the technology for the presentation according to local access and student knowledge. If students have ready access to technology and are confident in its use, they might create a soundtrack with still images of the artist; on the other hand, they might just play an audio file from a CD or phone, or in some other form. The important thing is how well students prepare their content.

I discovered that when students present about their chosen musician, it is important to give other students in the class something to do. I provide a small feedback slip like the one in Figure 1 and collect them at the end of each of the presentations. After checking them over, I give them to the presenter, who appreciates receiving feedback from peers.

Variations

- If students have limited access to technology, they might find still shots of their favorite group or musician and show them as a slideshow while a short excerpt of the music is

playing. For some musicians, the visual effect of the performance is part of the appeal, so photo images might be important. For choices such as orchestral works, it might not be as important to watch the orchestra play.

- Students can choose a musical work rather than an artist or composer. For example, the magnificent orchestral work *The Moldau*, by Smetana, musically describes the path of the Moldau River through geographic regions of the Czech Republic and Slovakia; the music is a travelogue of sorts. If you make it clear to students that the musical work doesn't have to include vocals, some may prefer to choose instrumental music.

- Once, only once, my students shared a folk dance as their selection, and we learned it together. This is not common, but it could be an option. And why not?

MUSIC WEBSITES

Finally, here are a few websites popular with ESL teachers to assist with using music in the classroom:

1. The Children's Music Network (https://childrensmusic.org/) is a small, not-for-profit organization I participate in. It provides nurturing, affirming songs for those working with children of all ages. At the link called "Song Library," there are currently three free, downloadable songbooks with a valuable collection of multicultural songs, peace songs, and environmental songs. Each song has an audio file, so listeners can hear and learn the song. Many of the songs are easy, natural sing-alongs.

2. Larry Ferlazzo must be the most prolific and productive ESL teacher in the English-speaking world. His blog site has thousands of links and reviews, and his English-teaching-focused website (http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/larry-ferlazzos-english-website/) is sorted well and updated daily. Ferlazzo publishes a "website of the day," and many of the selected websites feature music and/or culture; he collates the best websites about art and music every calendar year. Each site he highlights includes a short description and comment, so you get a good indication of what it offers. Ferlazzo somehow manages to be a full-time high school teacher in addition to doing this prodigious work as a service to teachers and learners around the world.

3. Dave's ESL Cafe (http://www.eslcafe.com/idea/index.cgi?display:913437837-1091.txt) has a collection of user-submitted song-based lesson plans. You can see what teachers around the world are using in various teaching environments and on many topics. All of the lessons are free, and you do not have to be a member to use the site; in fact, you can contribute to it.

4. The U.S. Department of State's American English site has an area specifically devoted to downloadable songs and games for teachers: https://americanenglish.state.gov/culture-music-and-game-resources. The songs come with recordings, lesson plans, lyrics, posters, maps, and more. By the way, the American English site includes the podcast of my own recent webinar, *Using Songs to Teach English*: https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/

EXAMPLE FEEDBACK FORM

Name of presenter: _____

Topic of the presentation: _____

My name: _____

"I really liked _____**."**

"I learned [that] _____**."**

Figure 1. Example feedback form for Portrait of a Musician presentation

using-songs-teach-english. All the materials can be downloaded and are free.

5. *The Guardian* newspaper, based in London, has a free teacher-resource service. With your free enrollment, you can download lesson plans, including a variety of music-oriented materials. As an example, here is a collection of teaching resources about musician David Bowie: https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2016/jan/13/teaching-about-david-bowie-links-lessons-and-inspiration

6. Lyricstraining.com is probably the best music and lyrics site to date, featuring thousands of music videos accompanied by cloze versions of lyrics. Students can choose one of four levels to type in the missing words as the songs play; they can also "compete" with others listening to the same song. Complete lyrics can be downloaded, and the site offers songs in several languages. Users do not need an account, as the site is supported by advertisers, but we are warned that the site gathers cookies from each user's device—a fairly common practice these days. According to high school teachers I am in contact with, this site is a huge hit with adolescent learners.

Enjoy every minute trying these ideas. I am sure you will—because I know that students are not the only music lovers!

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